

Resistance

Chapter One: Loss

Hermione crouched behind an outcropping of rocks, well hidden behind them, which was due in part to the nearly unbearable heat and light from Hagrid's house, which was in flames. She watched the battle for a moment, with an analytical mind, her eyes moving rapidly from one fighter to another, and shook her head in frustration. She was too far away to get a clear shot on anybody, as the main crux of the fighting had moved up the slope toward the castle, and there was no way to get closer to the fighting, not with the well-loved hut afire. The path she'd be forced to take would provide her no cover, and she knew she'd be cut down before she'd covered half the required distance. Her knee stung from where she had fallen, diving away from a curse, and her jeans were torn. There had been an unexpected attack from some other Order members after that, and the Death Eaters had evidently forgotten about her.

She slunk as far to the left as she dared, wondering if she could make the short sprint into the forest, using the trees for her cover, as she worked her way back toward Hogwarts. Her brow knit, and she absent-mindedly dashed a wayward strand of hair from her face, as she thought furiously. Her dirty fingers clenched a lip of rock, as she prepared to push herself upright and bolt for the trees. Before she could even move, however, someone landed unceremoniously next to her with a muffled grunt and wheeze, as he came in contact with the unaccommodating rock. Hermione let out a startled shriek, which she quickly bit off.

"Who are – oh, Harry," she said, lowering her voice to a guarded whisper. Harry smiled at her quickly, his long brown hair hanging down his back, coming loose from its ponytail. There was dirt and dried blood on one cheek, and he was favoring his left arm. "You've been hurt!" she said unnecessarily, and with some alarm.

"I'm all right," he assured her, in the voice that was and yet was not his. His brown eyes twinkled at her, despite the somber light that remained in them. She searched his face briefly, her eyes flitting from feature to feature, as she investigated whether or not he was telling

the truth, finally deciding that he was. She turned to look at the field of battle again.

“It’s going rather badly, isn’t it?” she asked him, worry creasing her brow, as she leaned against the rock, savoring the warmth that it had leeched from the midday sun – now sinking behind the trees, leaving long shadows and making visibility difficult. There would be a chill in the air soon. She turned back toward him, when he did not reply immediately, and saw that he was taking a long pull from a silver hip flask, much like the one that Moody often carried. She waited for him to finish, smiling slightly when he wiped his mouth on his sleeve and made a face, shuddering almost convulsively.

“God, that stuff tastes horrible,” he said, and her smile widened, for it was what he said nearly every time he drank the Polyjuice.

“Really?” she managed to crack briefly, “I rather thought you liked it.” Harry had been vehemently against the idea of regularly using Polyjuice when she had first brought it up when graduation loomed, when it was clear that Hogwarts – the last bastion of protection for Harry – would no longer serve as such. Hermione had sold the idea to the remainder of the Order, over Harry’s protests, and one night, some poor random Muggle on the street had lost his ponytail to a sneaky Ron Weasley and a sharp pair of scissors.

She looked at him again, thinking that she really missed his tousled raven-dark hair, piercing green eyes, and reluctant half-smile. Neither she nor Ron had seen him overmuch since graduation two weeks ago, since a new stranger suddenly seen hanging around with Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger would fool no one – not that she and Ron had been doing much lounging around in public either. They had mainly been holed up in the new Headquarters, beneath Fred and George’s shop, training, while Harry was secreted away in parts unknown, doing Merlin knew what.

“You’ve come from Hogsmeade, then?” she asked, her eyes flitting up to him and then back down to her filthy hands curled in her lap around her wand. She already knew the answer.

“They’ve taken it.”

“Charlie?” Hermione’s voice trembled. Harry clenched his jaw shut, as if letting out words would also let out emotion that he had to keep dammed up. He managed to shake his head jerkily in the negative. “Remus?” This time, Hermione’s voice skidded upward awkwardly, with a half-smothered sob. Pain glazed over Harry’s eyes, which still, Hermione realized, managed to look like Harry, even though they were dark.

“I – I don’t know,” he admitted, heavily. “He was fighting – the last I saw, there were four Death Eaters around him. And then – and then the Hog’s Head blew up, and I – I didn’t see anyone but them after that. I thought that – that I could probably be more use up here.”

She peered around the rock again, just in time to see Mad-Eye Moody fall. The crusty old ex-Auror was surrounded by four or five Death Eaters quickly, and she shielded her eyes from the flash of green light that soon followed.

“Oh, God,” escaped her lips in a kind of breathless gasp of disbelief and despair. Harry said nothing, but the muscle in his jaw worked violently, as he pressed his lips together tightly.

“I think we could make it to the forest,” Harry said suddenly, eying the open distance between them and the welcome shadows of the trees. Hermione followed his gaze, wondering if the shimmering heat from the fire would obscure anything that watchers might think they saw. Their eyes locked, and she nodded with determination. “You go. I’ll cover you,” he said, sounding more like an experienced fighter than an almost eighteen year old, barely out of school.

She leapt to her feet then, running in a crouch as lightly as a cat. She heard the zing and hiss of wandfire, and flinched in preparation for impact, even though it was coming from further up the slope where the fighting was. She made it to the blessed early twilight under the trees, and knelt behind a particularly large one, cushioned by the earthy bracken underfoot, and waited for Harry to come.

He did not.

She inched her way closer to the edge of the woods, careful to move silently, maneuvering to where she could see the cluster of rocks where they had hidden.

No one was there.

Ignoring the sudden frenzied panic in her accelerated heart beat, she began moving in the opposite direction, up the hill toward Hogwarts, trying to get nearer to the battle, wondering if that's where Harry had gone instead. The shouts and clamor grew louder, as she approached, keeping behind the densest of the undergrowth. She tapped her wand on her head, casting a Disillusionment charm on herself, as she drew perilously close to edge of the tree line, spotting a cluster of Death Eaters, and hoping to hear what was being said.

She noticed with a sinking heart that the battle appeared to be over. One Death Eater was circulating around the green, using Avada Kedavra on the fallen. Hermione winced and quavered as if every flash of green light were a painful, physical blow.

There was a prostrate form in between her and the Death Eaters, the face turned away so that it could not clearly be seen. But the long fiery hair gave the identity away, as surely as if it had been shouted. It was Bill, and he did not move.

Hermione pressed a fist into her mouth to stifle the sob that wanted to rise from her throat, and the fingers of her other hand clenched tightly around her wand, as one Death Eater nudged his body carelessly with the toe of his boot.

She caught the phrase, "last bloody one left." Her eyes widened in astonishment and horror. They can't all be dead! She strained her eyes, peering desperately around the overgrown greenery, trying to find Harry. He must have left their hiding place, when he saw Bill surrounded, in a bid to save his life.

"Naw, we got another 'un," came a voice from further down the hill. "And look what he's got!" There was a figure struggling madly between three other Death Eaters approaching from near what remained of Hagrid's house. Hermione's heart cracked painfully in

her chest, as she saw the Death Eater that had spoken wave a flask merrily in the air, the dying rays of the sun glinting off of its shiny finish.

“He Polyjuiced?” asked the one who had kicked Bill.

“Of course he is,” came a new voice, also hidden behind a mask, but a voice that Hermione recognized instantly, a smooth, cultured voice, quite different from those rather uneducated-sounding louts that were evidently the “brute force”. Lucius Malfoy, Hermione thought ferociously. “And he had Harry Potter’s wand,” he observed, a pleased note in his voice, as they drew closer. Lucius pulled the wand from the Death Eater’s hand, and twirled it lightly between his fingers. He leaned down quite close to their prisoner, and said in a voice so low that Hermione could barely hear, “I wonder who that makes him?” Malfoy’s head was cocked to one side, as he asked his question in a sing-song tone much like the one preferred by Bellatrix Lestrange.

In one fierce wrenching move, Harry had pulled himself free from his captors, knocking all three of them down with a wave of raw magic, even though he had been deprived of his wand. He whirled, lightning-quick, lunging for Malfoy, but the Death Eater, with a mere flick of his wand, had him frozen, his arms locked to his sides, and he fell hard, unable to catch himself in any way. There are too many of them, Hermione thought bleakly, even as she was startled by his sudden display of wandless magic. He has been training, she thought idly and irrelevantly.

“Take him!” Malfoy snarled to the reluctant Death Eaters, who, eying their fallen comrades, did not seem terribly eager to lay hands on the Boy Who Lived, regardless of what he looked like. They moved with a jolt, at Malfoy’s ferocious order, as if hit with an electric prod.

Hermione stood suddenly, still Disillusioned, but uncaring whether or not she was seen. Everyone was dead, Harry was captured, and she might as well go down trying to save him. She balanced on the balls of her feet, only seconds away from bolting into their midst and hitting as many of them as she could before they got her.

Somehow, from his prostrate position, Harry must have seen her, or perhaps sensed her presence, for she felt a tentative touch in her mind. Do not be seen! The words floated into her thoughts, with a surprising vehemence. Warn the Order! She pressed her lips together tightly, willing herself not to cry. Of course, Harry was right. She had forgotten all about those who were probably still fighting inside Hogwarts. But what hope did any of them have if Harry did not survive?

“The Dark Lord wants this one,” Lucius said, with a curled lip, and Harry was finally hauled roughly to his feet by two Death Eaters. “You two come with me. The rest of you will be needed in the castle,” he inclined his head toward Hogwarts.

Then the Order still fights! Hermione thought. She flung one last desperate glance at Harry’s imprisoned form, which still managed to radiate fury and challenge. Oh God, oh God, Harry!

Go! She heard his actual voice in his head, clear as a bell, and could not help but wonder at his fortitude, performing Legilimency, knowing he was shortly going to be facing his destiny.

Then she heard the loud, crude voices of the other Death Eaters, and sprinted ahead of them, under the cover of the trees, hoping against hope that she could reach Hogwarts before they did.

The front gate of Hogwarts was being well guarded, and Hermione, still hidden in the trees of the Forbidden Forest, despaired of ever reaching the castle, or finding means to help those of the Light that surely – please let it be, there had to be – were left alive inside. The Death Eaters had apparently taken control of the castle, but Hermione couldn’t help but think, with the last shred of hope left to her, that there were many hiding places in Hogwarts.

Something cracked in the darkness behind her, and she whirled defensively, facing nothing but blackness. There could be no one out here deliberately looking for her, she knew, what with the chaos of the recent battles, but the nightly noises made her very jumpy. The moon was a weak sliver, often hiding behind wisps of fast-moving

cloud, and did nothing to aid her. Her Disillusionment had long since worn off, but she had not fixed it, cloaked in darkness as she was.

The windows of Hogwarts were shrouded and dark, and the place looked completely devoid of any life. Hermione had not yet seen the firing of a Dark Mark into the air, nor heard any sounds that might indicate some kind of Death Eater revel, so she clung to the feeble hope, that perhaps, possibly, Harry still lived.

Another crackle in the underbrush behind her – and then another – made Hermione turn again, her palms clammy and her throat incredibly dry. And you call yourself a Gryffindor, she thought derisively at herself. Yet she could not shake Dumbledore's warning from years gone by about these very woods, even though she had traversed through them many times.

There was a sudden clamor of voices, as the guard on the front entrance of Hogwarts evidently changed. Hermione tried to make out what they said, but most of it was lost on the wind. She crept closer, but knew it was hopeless. The open space between the school and forest was certain death. Maybe death would be preferable to this...being the only one left.

A rustle sounded behind her, and two hands grabbed her, one around her mouth and the other around her waist, before she could even scream, which she probably would have done on pure instinct alone.

"Do not scream," came a low voice in her ear, and her trembling body relaxed.

"Remus," she said in the voice that she despised, one that trembled and wobbled tearfully from gratitude and relief. It annoyed her immensely. "We – we thought – Harry said – " She caught herself suddenly, and sharply trained her wand on him, asking him in an acerbic voice what Tonks' Patronus was.

"A wolf," he answered in a low voice, and she could just make out his eyes from the way the weak moonlight glinted its twin reflections on them. An audible sigh escaped her, and she lowered her wand, apologizing as she did so. Remus put a light hand on her shoulder,

and said kindly, "Do not apologize for the virtue of always keeping your wits about you." He nodded toward the castle. "How long have you been here?"

Hermione felt suddenly tired and drained. She had no idea of what time it was. Her watch had been smashed in her fall near the rocks. "A few hours?" She guessed. "They haven't left it unguarded."

"Then, there are people left alive," Remus whispered hopefully. "They're inventorying the dead, figuring out who may still be free. They're looking for us, hoping we'll walk right up to gates, searching for comrades. We shouldn't stay here."

"But – but the castle – if any in the Order still fight – " Hermione protested.

"Let's see if we can get to the Shrieking Shack," Remus said. "If we can get from there to Honeyduke's, perhaps we can see if anyone's left alive."

"Ron had the Marauder's Map, since he was with the group in Hogwarts," Hermione offered, finally managing to level her voice. "He might try to make for the tunnels."

"Good," Remus said decisively. "Come on. If we can make it under the Whomping Willow without being seen, we might be okay. So much of Hogsmeade is on fire, that we may escape any notice there." He searched her weary, traumatized face for a moment, peering closely at her in the almost nonexistent moonlight. "You mentioned Harry. Where is he?"

Hermione closed her eyes, as if she was unable to face Remus with the news that she bore. "They – they – they caught him, got his flask. Lucius Malfoy saw his wand – knew it was him. They took him to Voldemort."

Remus muttered something under his breath, and whether it was an oath or a prayer, Hermione did not know. "Then we're in more trouble than we yet realize," he said.

"There's been no Dark Mark yet. No celebration," Hermione hastened to say. "Harry could – could still – " She did not finish.

"Let us hope so," Remus said, as if he didn't really believe it, looking at her with a singularly world-weary look on his face. She wondered if he tired of living, when all those he loved continued to leave him behind. She remembered belatedly that Tonks had been fighting inside Hogwarts with Ron. He was as much invested in this as she was. But then she remembered Harry, and thought, No one is as much invested in this as I am. "They'll be looking for us," Remus broke into her jumbled thoughts. "We should go."

They walked in near silence, Hermione behind Remus, wands out, choosing their steps with care, and so moving nearly silently through the forest. Hermione could not shake the sensation that unseen eyes were watching them, and wondered if the centaurs would wait for wizardkind to implode under its own weight, as the humans warred with one another. At least they aren't hindering our progress, she thought, forcing her mind to focus on the small things, focusing on them because she knew she couldn't handle anything else, couldn't face the death and destruction that had rained down on this cursed day. Charlie, Bill, Moody...and where is Ron? Is he okay? The refrain moaned through her mind unbidden. She wouldn't think about Harry, couldn't think about Harry. Wondering whether or not he was still alive – and knowing that, in all likelihood, he wasn't – made it painful to breathe. She looked up at Lupin, watched where the darkness of his silhouette occasionally crossed patches of the slightly less-dark sky, which had the faintest of glows to it, like an unearthly and premature dawn. Suddenly, he ducked behind a tree, pulling her alongside him. He peered around it cautiously, and Hermione could just see the knobbly, spiky outline of the Whomping Willow at the edge of the forest.

"Wait here," he hissed in a barely audible voice, and slipped smoothly away from the tree. Hermione felt the rough bark under her hands and clung to it; it was tangible, real, something she could touch, something familiar in this alien world of blackness and silence and solitude and despair.

The slightest of rustles alerted her that Remus had returned.

"It's clear," he said. "I've frozen the tree. Let's go. I'm going to unfreeze it after you're in the tunnel, so that no one will follow us." Hermione nodded, though her brow creased with worry that Lupin might somehow be injured once the Whomping Willow was active again. The least Gryffindor part of her was too ashamed to admit that she was really afraid of his leaving her, and being alone again...everybody's dead rang through her mind like the inexorable tolling of a bell.

She followed him out, slinking slowly and carefully around the Willow's massive trunk, and slipping gracefully into the tunnel, smelling the pungent aroma of packed earth, and remembering the last time she and Lupin had been in this tunnel...with Harry. Lupin scrambled into the tunnel, a moment later, breathing heavily, but looking unscathed.

They exchanged glances, and proceeded down the tunnel, wands still out by mutual unspoken consent. After all, Snape had known about this tunnel, and he had not been seen or heard from since that dreadful night over a year ago.

Hermione and Lupin reached the Shrieking Shack without incident, and Hermione noticed the odd tint of the night sky was more prominent here. She suddenly realized that it was caused by the fires of Hogsmeade. There was a tightness in her chest that had been present since she realized with Harry that their battle had been lost, and it squeezed her now as they cautiously stepped outside the dilapidated building to see the orange glow that had once been Hogsmeade.

Hogsmeade...where she, Ron, and Harry had spent so many carefree hours, where she and Ron had had their first date, where they had secretly snuck food to Sirius... and now it was destroyed. He destroys everything, she thought somewhat bitterly, but the desire to thwart him, to ruin his plans by any means necessary surged through her, and she found the hidden will to keep fighting that had been buried under her fear.

They kept to the rears of the buildings in Hogsmeade, slinking along a tiny rutted track that cut between the town and the forest. The roar of the devouring flames was loud, and occasionally they heard a crack or rumble that indicated another falling building, but they discerned no human noises.

Have they all gone up to the castle? Hermione worried, is everything lost? When they got to Honeyduke's, it was burning, but they were able to clamber through a broken back window. A hiss of pain slid through Hermione's teeth, as she cut her palm from thumb to little finger on a dagger of glass protruding up from the windowsill.

"Are you okay?" Remus whispered, turning to help her through the window, and flipping her hand palm up to examine the wound. She grabbed a towel of questionable cleanliness from the counter and wrapped it firmly around the width of her hand. She couldn't flex her fingers at all, without sending smarting pain through her palm.

"I'm all right. We shouldn't linger here," she told him softly, her brown eyes dark and somber. The back of her throat already stung from the smoke, and her chest heaved with the reflexive need to cough. Lupin nodded, and they made their way down the cellar steps carefully, every sense on alert.

As they clambered through the trapdoor, Hermione went first, facing the tunnel, and hissed up to Lupin that it was clear. Remus Accioed some boxes in a hasty spell, as he closed the trapdoor, so that the boxes slid partially atop it. Hermione heard Lupin test the door, as if to ascertain that he would still be able to open it, should the need arise.

They made the long meandering walk back to Hogwarts in complete silence. Hermione thought that she must be functioning on some kind of automatic pilot. It seemed years since she'd awakened this morning, before dawn, and somehow she just kept putting one foot in front of the other. She'd seen more death than at any other time in her young life, and somehow her mind refused to deal with it, shunting it aside, so that she could keep putting one foot in front of the other.

Lupin had been walking in front of her, with just the palest glimmer of light emanating from the tip of his wand, when he doused the light wordlessly, holding up a hand for Hermione to stop. She did so, without question, thinking that they must now be near to Hogwarts.

Then she heard the voices.

“...got to try,” someone argued in a low voice that still managed to carry down the tunnel to them.

“We’ve no way to know ... down there...a trap,” wafted another voice, and this was one that Hermione recognized. Ron! Her heart leapt with joy at the thought that there were still others alive.

Lupin had returned to her side.

“I’m going to send my Patronus,” he said. “If something goes wrong, I want you to run like hell.” He turned back toward the Hogwarts end of the tunnel, and Hermione shielded her eyes from the sudden brightness of the silvery creature of mist. They stood there for an infinite moment, poised for flight, waiting for a response.

Two silver creatures bounded back toward them: a silver-white wolf and a Jack Russell terrier. With a glad cry, Hermione ran the remaining distance to where a small, sad group of people sat.

The tense muscles in Ron’s face melted into a smile when he saw her, standing quickly and catching her in his arms. She squeezed him tightly, as her gaze danced over the faces of those that remained: Ron, Tonks, and McGonagall. Ginny lay prone and unconscious on the earthen floor, obviously injured somehow.

“Hermione!” Ron said in a dazed voice, and looked up as an exclamation from Tonks alerted him to Lupin’s presence. The redhead looked like Christmas had come early. “Where are the others?”

Hermione’s smile faltered and fell off of her face, as she and Lupin exchanged almost guilty glances. Tonks paled and McGonagall’s lips

thinned. Ron merely looked at the two new arrivals without comprehension.

“Where are the others?” he repeated. “You came from Hogsmeade,” he directed this at Remus. “Where’s Harry? Where’s Charlie?” And whirling on Hermione, he added, “Where’s Bill?”

“Ron,” Hermione spoke with effort, her jaw trembling and her voice cracking. She reached out as if to touch him, but he shied away from her hand. “Bill and Charlie are dead.” An almost animal-like whine of despair rattled in his throat, and he shoved shaking hands into his pockets. Hermione noticed absently that his left arm had been badly burned, but was glowing pinkly with a healing charm.

“H – Harry?” he choked out, barely able to say anything at all.

“Lucius Malfoy took him to Voldemort,” came Lupin’s detached, dull-sounding voice. A muffled sob erupted suddenly from Tonks, and Ron sagged so quickly that Hermione moved to his side, afraid that he was going to fall.

“And everyone else?” McGonagall asked, her lilting brogue still sounding melodic, even through its forlorn words. Lupin just shook his head, and the Headmistress lowered her eyes to the ground, looking uncharacteristically defeated.

“Your team?” Lupin asked in response, although the answer screamed at them in the dim tunnel. There was no one else. Tonks looked slightly stunned, her eyes glazed as she replied in a monotone.

“They were using the Killing Curse like it was a Lumos charm.” So that’s it then, Hermione thought.

“Have you heard from the Order members fighting at the Ministry? Diagon Alley?” Lupin asked, and McGonagall shook her head. Ron and Hermione drew away from the conversation, closer to Ginny.

“Is she going to be okay?” Hermione asked gently. Ron gazed at his sister without really seeing her.

"If we could get her to St. Mungo's, she'd probably be fine." Ron's voice testified that he didn't really think that was possible. "We don't even know who's got control of it." And then, abruptly, "Mum's dead."

The disinterested way he spoke made a wave of nausea wash over Hermione, and she tried desperately to stem the rising bile in the back of her throat.

"I'm so sorry," she croaked inanelly, wondering if anything would ever be all right again. He finally looked at her again, and his blue eyes were iridescent with tears.

"Was Harry – did Harry – ?" he stammered.

"He was alive when Malfoy took him," Hermione said evenly, calling on all her control for Ron's sake. "He took down three Death Eaters with wandless magic before Malfoy Petrified him." She sounded proud. "Malfoy said the Dark Lord wanted him. He – he – he was alive when – when they left," she repeated, as if convincing herself. When she stopped speaking, she was startled to realize that the three adults had halted their conversation and were listening to her. "He told me to go, to warn you," she said, directing this toward Tonks and McGonagall. "He used Legilimency. But I couldn't get into the castle. They – they were watching." She spoke in a plaintive voice, as if she was apologizing for failure, and began to shake violently, and this time it was Ron who put the steadying arm around her.

"Honeyduke's was clear; we just came from there," Lupin said, addressing the group from the school. "If we can get back there, we can Apparate to the Shop."

"Mr. Weasley brought us down here," McGonagall said. "It's kept us from being detected by the Death Eaters so far, but we weren't sure if Hogsmeade was safe."

"Hogsmeade has been all but burned to the ground," Lupin informed her. "But the Death Eaters obviously think they've killed everyone there. They're not watching it. I think we can make it safely to the twins' place."

"We're not going to be able to stay there long," Tonks put in. "We can't stay any place that –" Lupin was giving her a warning look, and she glanced furtively at Ron and Hermione before stopping abruptly.

"Any place that Harry knows about, you mean?" Hermione said suddenly, with an accusing note in her voice. A silence fell over the group as they thought of the implications of that...that Harry was perhaps alive, perhaps being tortured into giving information that would make Voldemort's victory just that much more complete.

"Why would Voldemort do that?" Ron asked. "Wouldn't he just – just kill Harry and have done?"

"There's been no Dark Mark yet," Hermione pointed out.

"This is a war," Ron countered. "And they certainly haven't been taking any prisoners so far."

"Harry is revenge," Hermione said, growing more certain that she was right with every word she spoke. "Harry is the culmination of everything Voldemort has fought for and dreamed of. He's going to try to break him first." Ron's face turned pasty as he thought of what that meant.

"And if he doesn't succeed? If Harry doesn't break?"

"Then Voldemort will come after us, try to use us to break him," Hermione replied, and a kind of fire flickered in her eyes. "We've got to rescue Harry before that happens."

"Hermione, you're crazy!" Ron said. "We don't know where he is, and we especially don't know if he's even alive." Hermione's face hardened at his harshly spoken words.

"If there's even the smallest of chances that he is alive, we owe it to him to try," she said stubbornly. Ron opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted by Lupin.

"This is neither the time nor place for this conversation. We're fortunate that we've not yet been caught. Let's go." Properly

chastised, Ron and Hermione fell into file, after levitating Ginny between them.

Lupin and McGonagall Apparated from Honeyduke's cellar first, while the others remained crouched and hidden under the trapdoor. It seemed like hours before they returned, but Hermione knew that they had been scouting the Shop to make sure it was safe, and to strengthen the wards around it. They had been unable to ever use Grimmauld Place again, since Snape had known about it, and it looked like they would be unable to stay in their newest hideout for much longer. Hermione thought again of Harry in pain, being asked questions over and over again, and somehow managed to squelch the rising desire to throw up.

Finally, there was a scuffle above them, and the trapdoor opened again to reveal Lupin. He and Tonks exchanged the obligatory security questions, and they handed Ginny out to him. He Apparated away, and a moment later, everyone followed suit.

Hermione was pathetically glad to see the familiar, bunker-like surroundings of the Shop. Accessed by a hidden door that moved around periodically in the Weasley twins' laboratory, which was already barred from most visitors by many charms and hexes, it had been tunneled out underground using magic. There were several bedrooms – small ones containing multiple bunks – a couple of bathrooms, a kitchen, a library, and what Ron liked to call the War Room, where they conducted training and strategy sessions. It was usually empty, except for a table and chairs in the corner, and several large maps of England on the walls.

Ron had made some kind of glad, wordless noise, as he saw one of his brothers seated in the War Room, staring into the fireplace, which had a secure Floo connection.

"Where's George?" Ron asked, his mouth moving before he saw the dead look in his brother's eyes. Hermione saw his throat quiver, as he swallowed hard, and she wondered how much more her best friend and boyfriend would be able to take.

"Fred was able to make it back here, and revamp the wards around the Shop. If he hadn't, they could have very well discovered this

place,” Lupin said, his eyes going gently to Fred’s dazed face. It seemed clear to Hermione that Fred had spoken to Lupin about wishing he had gone with George, but had somehow felt obligated to the duty of protecting the Order’s headquarters.

“Have you heard from Dad?” Ron asked, hesitantly. Arthur Weasley had been at the Ministry when it had fallen under attack. Fred shook his head woodenly.

Mr. Weasley was probably dead too, Hermione thought dully. Everybody’s dead, all of them, all of them are dead; it was a sing-song refrain in her mind, and she wondered detachedly if she were going mad. She had a sudden mental image of Harry, his furious, determined face – his real face, this time – smeared liberally with his blood. And then he screamed.

The vision seemed so real that she started, and looked around warily to find all eyes in the room on her. She wondered if she’d made some kind of exclamation out loud.

“Miss Granger, are you quite all right?” McGonagall asked gently, and, to her horror, Hermione heard a hysterical, high-pitched laugh bubbling from her lips. She clamped her mouth closed, abruptly muting the disquieting sound, and nodded at the Headmistress apologetically.

Tonks had moved quickly to Hermione’s side, clearly going into Auror mode, even though she tripped over the edge of the rug. She put one soothing arm around the younger girl, and spoke in a clipped voice, addressing everyone in the room.

“Everyone needs to get some sleep. This place is warded; I think we’ve enough security to allow that at least. I’ll take the first watch. I’ve had the most training,” she said, overriding Lupin’s pending protest, before he could even voice it properly. “The rest of you, get a shower, maybe some food, and then some rest.” She exchanged an unreadable look with Remus. “There’s going to be a lot to do tomorrow.”

Hermione had quietly obeyed the Auror, for once pathetically glad that there was someone else 'in charge,' someone to give her clear and well-defined instructions to follow. She had meandered back to an empty bedroom, but at the sight of her filthy, sooty face, and the grimy, rust-stained towel still clenched, forgotten, in her bloody fist, she decided that a shower might first be in order.

She cast a Healing charm on the livid looking cut on her palm, before climbing into the small, antiseptically white shower stall, one of three situated in the womens' lavatory. She closed her eyes, standing directly under the steaming stream, letting the water cascade off of her in all directions. When she opened her eyes briefly, and saw the grayish-brown water swirling down the drain, she thought briefly that she was going to be sick again.

The image of Harry screaming and bloody flashed in her mind again, with a suddenness and reality that made her jump and her elbow collide painfully with the unyielding wall of the stall. Suddenly there was no solace in the comfort of the warm water streaming over her; there was no peace to be found in cleanness, fresh pajamas, and soft sheets. Abruptly, she reached up and turned off the water with one forceful motion.

After getting dressed, deciding to sleep in soft flannel pants and a sweatshirt, in case of any middle of the night moves that might be deemed necessary, and casting a drying charm on her long, snarly hair, she padded down the hall, looking askance at the room that she had shared with Ginny in the past.

It was dark there, and she noted a beam of light trailing out from another room, followed by the sound of muffled voices of concern. McGonagall and Tonks were obviously working on Ginny. I wonder if she knows that her mum is dead, Hermione thought, standing motionless in the hallway, not really wanting to go into that empty, dark room alone.

She took a deep breath, and knocked on the door to the room where Ron and Fred would be sleeping, poking her head inside. The two boys were sitting on a bottom bunk, side by side, clad for bed, neither moving nor speaking, staring at something that Hermione couldn't

see. She immediately felt like she'd intruded, and backed up, stammering something that sounded sort of like, "I'll see you in the morning."

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Ron said, blurting out the question with a perceptiveness that unnerved her.

"I – I – " she stammered, groping for words, while her mind screamed irately. What's wrong? What's wrong? How long have you got? Everything's wrong; it's all gone to hell, and I couldn't fix it, couldn't stop it. Harry didn't save us, and we didn't save Harry. The entire world has been irrevocably altered, and I don't know how to face it! No, she couldn't say any of that to her best friend, the lanky redheaded boy that had just lost most of his family, even though she knew that he was probably feeling the same things too.

"I didn't want to sleep by myself," she finally said, shuffling her feet a little self-consciously. Ron and Fred both stood, in a gesture of welcome, and without further words, they each took one of her hands, and helped her up to the bunk above the one on which they'd been sitting.

For one brief, shining moment, Hermione thought it was like something Harry and Ron would have done, and she smiled, as she reached down to hug both boys, wishing them a good night, automatically, even as she realized how hollow such words were. She pulled the sheets up around her, as Ron and Fred doused the light, and got into their own bunks as well.

Then she remembered the reality, and turned over in a restless, unhappy movement, pressing her mouth against the clean-smelling pillow, hoping that it would be enough to stifle the worst of her sobs.

The sound of Harry screaming – a memory that she could only suppose she had invented to torment herself – rang in her ears as she fell into an uneasy sleep.

TBC

Okay, I'd really like some reviews for this one. I know I'm an idiot for posting another new story, but this one won't leave me alone. I am still working on "Isle" and don't anticipate any untoward delays on an update (although it is probably starting to feel like my redheaded step-child).

Anyway, I know exactly where I want to go with this one, and am really curious to know what everyone thinks. I'm sort of ditching the Horcruxes, although they'll probably be mentioned, as a "they already did that before our story began" kind of thing. Other than that, I'm trying to move from book 6 canon.

This is going to be mostly a story about Hermione, and I'm going to try to keep it from her point of view. It will probably be darker than what I've done before, but hopefully not overly so, especially once Harry's been rescued – by Hermione, of course.

Please let me know what you think. I wouldn't have already posted it, but I'm dying for some feedback.

Chapter Two: Absolution

Hermione opened her eyes the next morning, and was, for an instant, unable to remember where she was or how she got there. Then she felt the headache pounding in her temples, the raw skin underneath eyes that have been wiped too often, and the tender stretchiness of her newly healed palm, and it came flooding back with nauseating clarity. She sighed gustily, having hoped somehow that this had all been some horrid, unfathomable nightmare – like the vivid ones of Harry screaming, Bill's staring, but unseeing eyes, Moody being surrounded, green flashes that had punctuated her sleep all night long. There was no way to tell, of course, if it was morning, since they were underground, but she could hear the bustle of people beyond the door. Fred had already arisen, apparently, and she could faintly hear the crackle of the Wizarding Wireless, though she couldn't make out any of the words.

"You 'wake, Hermione?" came a voice from the bunk beneath hers. Ron's voice was rough and shaky, and he sounded as unrested as she felt. She made a mumbling noise of assent, and climbed down from her bunk, settling in cross-legged at the foot of Ron's bed and stealing his blanket.

"Hi," she said, pulling the blanket up under her chin. It smelled like the soap he used, and she was momentarily grateful for that one small consistency. What words did one use, she pondered, when it was clearly not a good morning, and there might not ever be a good morning again? The silence between them was fraught with awkwardness and heartache.

"Hi," he finally responded in a raspy voice, and she noted the purple-blue rings under his eyes, which seemed sunken in his head. His fiery red hair was tousled, and seemed to have leached all of the color from his pale, drawn face. He suddenly looked much older than his years. A sort of convulsion trembled through his shoulders. "Not a dream, then?" he asked, sitting up and leaning his chin on his knees.

Hermione wondered if tears were going to take up permanent residence behind her eyelids. She shook her head. "No," she choked out, forcing the words past the hot, painful clog twisting in her throat.

"It's not a dream." His frame drooped a little, as if she'd told him something mildly disappointing, like a bad mark on an exam.

"I – I was sort of hoping that it was," Ron admitted suddenly, sucking in a noisy gasp of air. Tears brimmed over in his eyes, and spilled down his cheeks, apparently without his notice. "Mum – she was – she – " His voice was barely intelligible through the emotion.

"Ron," Hermione rested one hand on his arm sympathetically, dashing away the wetness on her cheeks with the other hand. "You don't have to tell me. I know how much it hurts." He scraped both palms over his cheeks, and blinked at her, as if he hadn't seen her before.

"That's right," he said dully. "I'd forgotten." Hermione wasn't surprised, but neither did she blame him, after what he'd been through. Her parents had been killed so early in the conflict that it seemed like ages ago – when it had really only been a handful of months. If I hadn't been at the Dursleys' with Harry and Ron last summer, she thought, knowing that her fate would have been that of her parents.

When Remus and Mrs. Weasley appeared at the front door of #4, Hermione had known – had known it like the dreadful, sinking certainty of bad news that one gets when the phone rings suddenly at 2:30 in the morning, or when a police car pulls into one's driveway for no apparent reason. She hadn't cried, not then, not in front of Ron, whose blue eyes were wide and mournful, even as he shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking fidgety and uncertain. She hadn't cried in front of Harry then, even though a shudder ran through her slender frame when he laid one hand gently on her shoulder. His face had been tight and pinched and angry and ... profoundly guilty.

She had been practically able to read the thoughts running through his mind. This is all my fault. Being around me gets people killed. She would have been so much better off if she had never even met me. Everyone would. She had turned to Harry then, while everyone was poised to comfort her, waiting for her to say or do something so they could react, and looked at him, with hot, fierce, shining, dark eyes.

"It's not your fault, Harry. I will never forget what Voldemort has done to my – to my mum and d – dad. But I will never forgive him for what he has done to you." Their eyes had met then, shimmering, tear-filled gazes full of reflective agony.

"I'm – I'm so sorry," Harry had rasped, barely able to speak, and she did not reply, but merely held out her arms.

And then they were both clinging to each other, both crying, both assuring each other that somehow it would all work out, that somehow they would make it all work out. After all, he was the Boy Who Lived, and she was the Most Brilliant Witch of Her Age.

A snort of derision escaped Hermione, and Ron's look of confusion brought her back to the present.

"I'm sorry, Ron," she mumbled, burying her face in both hands for a moment, and then blinking back up at him. "I was just thinking of – of that day Remus and your mum came – came and told me that – that – what had happened."

"I was pretty useless that day, wasn't I?" Ron said, one corner of his mouth curling up in a bleak smile. "I was afraid that nothing I could have said would be – would be any comfort to you at all. And now that – now I – I guess I know now that nothing I could have said would have made it better." He looked at her again, and she reached out and took his hand in hers. "A bit stunning really, how much it hurts," he continued, almost clinically, his voice detached. "Like you're surprised that you still need to eat and breathe and use the loo. Like everything should have stopped because you feel so – so – " He appeared suddenly startled by his soul-baring, and stopped abruptly.

"Frozen? Numb?" Hermione supplied glibly, arching her eyebrows in question.

"Yeah," Ron said, his thumb moving absently over the back of her hand. His gaze seemed very far away. "She was – she was knocking Ginny out of the way of some curse – I don't even know what it was. Ginny still got some of it, but Mum – Mum took the brunt of it." His face was wet again, but he didn't seem to notice. "She – she was

alive for a little bit, but she – she – she just stopped breathing. I heard her die.”

“Ron – ” Hermione tried in a blurred voice of protest, but Ron spoke over her, as if the need to tell someone were something putrid that he felt compelled to purge, and she let him.

“I had – we had the Marauder’s Map,” he said, and she nodded that she knew. “Harry gave it to me, right before everyone split up. I had been looking at it the whole time. And then, I got burned and dropped the bloody thing. Tonks had bent over to pick it up – barely missed getting herself cursed. They just came out of nowhere. Remus was healing me – we’d stopped in a doorway – when it happened.” Hermione did not have to ask what ‘it’ was. His entire face was a mute testimony to the impotent rage and helpless despair that he had felt at that time. “I should have been watching, I should have been paying attention. It was only for a moment, but – but – ” in that moment, you lost everything, Hermione finished for him. She thought of her sprint to the forest, when Harry did not follow her, of the sinking, bitter despair that raked over her like venomous claws when she saw the Death Eaters leading him up the hill.

“Don’t blame yourself, Ron,” Hermione heard herself saying mechanically. “All of this is because what Voldemort has chosen to do, not because of what you did or didn’t do. Your mother loved you, all of you. And she would rather have died than see anything happen to her children.”

“I know, Hermione. I mean, with my – with my head, I know you’re right. But I still – I still feel so – ” so damn guilty, she finished for him again, as he stumbled to an ungainly halt.

There was a long silence, as they sat together on the narrow bed, fingers intertwined. Ron’s face was an excruciating mask of pain and despair, his eyes shuttered, numb, glazed. Hermione dabbed her tender, puffy eyes with the corner of the sheet, and thought of Harry.

“How do you do it?” he asked her hoarsely, his voice sounding intrusive in the near total silence. It had lain comfortably over Hermione’s ears like a soft blanket of nothingness. She looked at him

quizzically, and he continued. "How have you been getting through every day? You lost your parents and the world you grew up in. Now the only other world you've ever known is gone too." It had been fairly easy, Hermione thought, when one had had no choice at all. She sat for a moment, contemplating his words. After a hasty discussion with Harry, Tonks, and Remus, it had been an easy matter for the wizards to place evidence at the smoldering once-inferno that had been the Granger house. As far as the Muggles were concerned, Hermione Granger had died with her parents in that fire. She didn't really expect it to fool anyone in the wizarding world for long, but at least this would keep any other members of her family out of danger, if they felt the need or desire to take her in.

"It's not over. This world is not gone. We can still fight! That's how you get through every day, knowing that people need you to fight for them!" Hermione said, wanting to sound strong, but sounding more like she was pleading with Ron, especially when her voice cracked in the middle of her declaration.

"It's a pipe dream, Hermione!" Ron said in a dead voice that somehow cracked Hermione's fragile heart even further. "We might as well fight, but we're not going to win. Harry was the one prophesied to destroy him, and he didn't. Voldemort's won! And everything is lost." Hermione began reflexively shaking her head, even before Ron had finished speaking.

"No. No, he's not gone. Quit talking about him in the past tense like he's dead."

"The Dark Lord's taken him. He is dead!" Hermione blinked at him, stunned and furious. She didn't think she'd ever heard any Order member, save Snape, refer to Voldemort as the 'Dark Lord'.

Face it, Hermione. In all likelihood, he's dead. You know that! Practical Hermione, who had been recently submerged beneath Emotional Hermione, seized the forefront of her consciousness once again. He can't be dead. He can't be dead. What will I do if he's dead? Emotional Hermione thought incoherently. What do you mean, 'What will I do?' Practical Hermione said in a voice of derision. Isn't everyone in this together? There was a rising tide of pain and

tightness in her chest, product of an unexpected emotion that Hermione was not capable of or prepared to identify at that moment. She firmly squelched it.

He was standing in the middle of a stone room, in the center of a glowing, green ring inset into the damp floor. One eye was swollen shut, and his entire face was crusted in blood. He had been looking at the ground, but suddenly looked up, and in his good eye still flashed the defiance that had not been evident in his pose. Hermione recognized that look; it was the same one he got when Malfoy insulted Muggle-borns, or when he had spotted the Snitch. It was his “never say die” look.

And he was looking at her.

She gasped suddenly and audibly, wheezing the breathless word, “Harry!” when she exhaled.

“Hermione, stop!” Ron said forcefully, his voice angry, but his eyes still wet with tears. “This is hard enough without – ” She stood suddenly, clasp and twisting her hands together – her fingers were suddenly cold and clammy. She moved in a couple of different directions, saying,

“Oh...oh...” under her breath, before she finally bolted for the door, muttering something untelligibly under her breath. She could feel the heat in her cheeks and the excitement blazing from her eyes, and was more than a little sure that she must have looked half-mad.

She sprinted into the War Room, where Tonks, Remus, McGonagall, and Fred were huddled around a map at the far corner. They were talking quietly, pointing out various places on the map, where Remus was sticking small pins with flags on them. There were black pins in Hogsmeade and Hogwarts and – Hermione noticed with some alarm – several other places as well, one in London, that Hermione thought must be the Ministry itself.

“What – what – ” she stammered, as they all looked up to see her carom into the room. None of them looked as if they’d slept at all. Remus appeared as he often did on the day after a transformation,

and Tonks' hair hung in a long, drab, messy plait down her back. "How's Ginny?" she blurted.

"There has been some improvement," McGonagall said gently, although her sharp eyes were still searching Hermione's face. "I've tried to contact Poppy, but communications are haywire, and we still don't know what's being watched."

"But St. Mungo's – ?" the younger woman asked.

"I went over there this morning – used Harry's invisibility cloak," Fred put in. "Still seemed to be operating as usual, but it was positively covered up with Death Eaters. We'd be taken before we got within a kilometer of the place."

"Hermione!" Ron hollered, finally hurtling into the room behind her. "What the hell is going on?" It wasn't until she saw the bewildered look of worry commingled with apology and despair on his face that she felt regret for just running away from him like that. He had learned too recently and too well that nothing should be taken for granted.

"They were just telling me about Ginny," Hermione said in a voice of calm quiet, and Ron's attention was instantly distracted.

"Is she going to be okay?" he asked immediately.

"We can't get her to St. Mungo's," Fred told his last remaining brother. "Professor McGonagall has been trying to reach Madam Pomfrey." Ron was looking between him and his old Professor, with a look that clearly said, "so, what's the problem?" Hermione regarded him with bitter amusement; for all his matter of fact assertions that their world had been irreversibly obliterated, he had still not taken in what exactly that would mean.

"Come on, Ron!" Fred said wearily, reading the look as easily as Hermione did. "Owl post is shot to hell. We can barely use the Floo because we don't know who's watching. Same goes for Apparating anywhere. Every bloody Death Eater who ever took a Dark Mark appears to be roaming around Wizzarding London, including right

above our own bloody heads!" He pointed at the ceiling for emphasis, and Ron blanched. "They've already gotten Harry, and guess who are the next-most-wanted on Voldemort's Hit List?" He looked pointedly at the remaining two members of the Trio, and Hermione flinched as if he'd physically struck her.

"Mr. Weasley!" McGonagall said, somewhat reprovingly, but the austere conviction usually present in her voice was noticeably missing. Fred subsided, looking mostly apologetic, though a flash of "well, it's the truth!" was still evident in his eyes. Ron had finally noticed the black pins in the map, and Hermione watched his gaze flicker from one to the next.

"They've taken the Ministry?" he asked hoarsely, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down, as he swallowed with difficulty. The three adults in the room – it still seemed pretentious to think of themselves and Fred as grown up, Hermione thought vaguely – exchanged troubled glances, and Remus finally nodded shortly. Ron waited for someone to volunteer more information, but no one did. "Dad?" he finally prodded, holding his body rigid, as if prepared for a blow. "Percy?" He sounded as if he didn't have enough air in his lungs to even wheeze the word. Hermione supposed that thinking your brother was a great git was a far cry from actually wanting something bad to happen to him.

"There hasn't been any communication from the Ministry since the attacks began yesterday," Tonks finally said, seeing that no one else was going to talk. "I've been trying – going through all the security protocols we have, but I haven't had any response."

"So he's dead then?" Ron said, his intonation making it sound more like a statement than a question. Hermione watched the bitterness come surging back into his eyes with all the force and inevitability of a tidal wave.

"We don't know that yet!" Hermione snapped, moving over to his side, desperate for him not to abandon all hope. "We don't know much of anything yet. We're still alive and –"

"More's the pity!" Ron interjected, his eyes flashing with angry grief.

“And while there’s life, there’s hope,” she finished lamely, her voice becoming very small and tentative, as she recognized the utterly unwelcome triteness of her inappropriate words. “That’s what my – that’s what my dad used to say, anyway...” she trailed off, standing motionless in the middle of the room, feeling somewhat wilted. Ron’s arms hung loosely at his sides, and he appeared absorbed in his shoes. He heaved a ragged sigh, and would not look at her. The tension in the room was thick and unbreathable, as painfully obvious as the despair which radiated from every face.

“What are the green pins?” Hermione asked, her brittle voice falling like pieces of shattered glass into the silence of the room. Tonks cleared her throat.

“They’re ideas for possible safe-houses,” she said. “The red ones are the ones that have already been exposed.” Hermione stepped closer to the large map, and saw that Ottery St. Catchpole was marked with a red pin, as was Godric’s Hollow and Grimmauld Place. Then, another pin caught her eye. It marked the last known location of Voldemort, and just pierced the “g” in Little Hangleton. In lighter days, someone, either Fred or George, had charmed an over-large skull on the head of the pin, which periodically got hit in the head by a lightning bolt and let out a tiny shriek.

She regarded the pin for a moment, watching it with wide, solemn eyes, wondering if Voldemort was still at the Riddle house. She figured that it was more likely that he had long since made for another location, especially since their intelligence information about Voldemort tended to be very outdated and spotty with regard to accuracy.

“Where are we going to start?” she asked, her eyes still fixed on the skull pin. There was a minute flash, as the bolt of lightning hit it between the eyes. Harry, she thought. Pathetic how even that little Weasley joke was painful now.

“Well, there’s an abandoned house on a cliff in Cornwall,” Tonks said. “It’s large, and can easily be warded up with no one seeing. Nobody

could sneak up on us either; it's very defensible." Hermione shook her head; Tonks had misunderstood her meaning.

"No, I mean, where will we start looking for Harry?" She reached up and fingered the skull-topped pin absent-mindedly. The silence got awkward and heavy. Remus looked particularly watery-eyed.

"Hermione!" Ron began again, but Fred hushed him with a wave of his hand.

"Hermione..." Tonks tried, her voice markedly more gentle than Ron's had been. For that reason, it also annoyed Hermione. The Auror began ticking things off on her fingers, as she spoke. "We – we have to get in touch with other Order members that could still be alive. We have to establish lines of communication. We have to figure out how to move people to Cornwall, how to acquire supplies. We have to figure out what our next move is going to be, if there's still any kind of government in place, if the Minister is even still alive. We – "

"You mean, you don't have time to help Harry," Hermione enunciated, stubborn tears pricking her eyelids, as she looked stonily at the map of England. The words 'Little Hangleton' blurred and wavered in her gaze.

There was a hiss of air behind her, as Tonks sighed. Hermione could practically feel her exchanging questioning looks with Remus and McGonagall.

"If there were any indication of the possibility that Harry lives..." Remus began, his voice tentative. "Hermione, you know we would do anything to save him." She remained silent, her shoulders square, her spine rigid, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. She winced and relaxed her hand, as her fingernails dug painfully into her recently healed palm. "Hermione, I loved him like he was my own son!" The werewolf finally exclaimed, his voice edged with frustration and sadness.

Hermione whirled on him then. "Quit talking about him in the past tense!" she yelled, her voice just shy of being hysterical. She caught herself, much as she had the night before, and forced herself to

resume speaking steadily. "Harry is still alive. I know it." The excitement that she had felt a moment ago, when she had come to the conclusion that the reason she was seeing Harry was because he was still alive, thrummed through her again. She glowered at each of them in turn, her eyes darkly furious, like pools of hidden fire. She said this in such a decisive Hermione-like way, that Fred's eyes lit up, and Tonks took an unconscious step forward.

"How do you know?" Tonks asked. Hermione thought that she saw a narrow pink highlight form in the plait that was now flipped forward over her shoulder.

"Because if he'd died, I would know! I would be able to feel it if he weren't ... here anymore," she said, putting one hand over her heart. She saw everyone in the room sag a little, as if the answer had been disappointing and not what they'd expected. The highlight in Tonks' hair must have been a trick of shadow, for when Tonks shifted her weight, it was gone. Ron was staring just staring at Hermione, as if he'd never laid eyes on her before.

"Hermione, that's – that's not exactly something we can ... take to the bank," Fred said, his uncharacteristically gentle and rather patronizing voice both jarring and irritating her.

"I am telling you he is alive! He has always given everything he has to help you, and he does not deserve to be so summarily abandoned!" Hermione said, slapping her hand down on the surface of the table so hard that Fred and Tonks both jumped, and that she reopened the wound on her palm. She hissed at the sting of pain that suddenly jabbed her palm like a dozen tiny needles, and rubbed her thumb distractedly in the blood that began to smear across her hand.

"Why would Voldemort keep Harry alive?" Lupin asked, looking as stricken as she had ever seen him. "He has done everything he could think of to kill Harry for the last seven years!"

"It's his moment of triumph!" Hermione said, a note of sarcasm in her tone. "Perhaps he wants to savor it! I told you last night – capturing Harry is the endgame. But think about it, Harry has thwarted Voldemort for nearly eighteen years, defeated him as a toddler, as a

young wizard barely in school who knew nothing about magic. Harry found out his secret, hunted down his horcruxes and destroyed them. Now, Voldemort is one-seventh of a soul – who knows if he even has enough of a soul left to split again? Voldemort has Harry right where he wants him, but that upstart son of a Mudblood mother has still managed to muck up all his plans! You don't think that Voldemort won't want to make him beg for death before the end?"

The others in the room stood as if they had all been Petrified. Hermione wondered if it was from what she said or from the derogatory term she had used. Ron had visibly flinched when the word 'mudblood' had crossed her lips.

"It's possible, Miss Granger, but still unlikely," McGonagall said, as firmly as if Hermione were still a student in school. "Voldemort has no safety net left, since Harry destroyed the horcruxes. He wouldn't keep Harry alive, and risk a defeat, not when he only has the same number of lives as the rest of us, now. The likeliest scenario is that Harry was killed soon after he was brought before Voldemort."

Hermione closed her eyes, as if doing so would make McGonagall's words less logical, less probable. The image of Harry screaming filtered into her head again, and she wobbled visibly on her feet. The other Order members waited for her to speak, waited for her to concede that they were right, waited to enfold her in hugs of comfort. She knew they all loved and mourned Harry...maybe almost as much as she did.

Harry's shirt was torn and blood-stained. It looked like a couple of his fingers were broken. Half of his face was swollen, purple and grotesque, one eye merely a slit in his pummeled face. And yet his good eye seemed to pierce into her very mind, radiating challenge and fury and refusal to surrender.

She opened her eyes and jerked her chin up suddenly, defiance sparkling through the tears.

"I know Harry is alive," she stubbornly asserted yet again. "I have seen him." She searched all of their faces again, and noted the varied degrees of sadness, pity, uncertainty, and perplexity that she saw

there. "And if none of you will help me, then I will figure out how to find him by myself." She bit off the last words, and turned on her heel.

A moment later, the door to the library slammed decisively.

Hermione looked at her smashed watch out of habit, sighing in frustration as she remembered a half-second too late that it would not tell her the correct time. She had no idea what time it was, but she had been holed up in the library for hours. She had not eaten at all, and her stomach rumbled noisily, even as she flexed her cramped fingers back and forth in an effort to ease the ache. They protested their long stint of uninterrupted time spent clenching a quill. Several feet of parchment flowed across the desk, and plummeted in rolls and billows to the floor.

She stood from her chair, groaning as she arched her back, her knees creaking loudly as she straightened them out fully. She wanted to go out to the War Room and look at the map again. After careful assessment, there were only a few places where Voldemort could be holding Harry, only a few Death Eaters who had estates extensive enough to support an operation like – like taking over the world – she thought derisively. There was also the possibility that Voldemort had returned to Hogwarts with Harry, although she wasn't sure whether he would want to give Harry even the admittedly slight advantage of familiar ground.

She looked longingly toward the library door. She had sealed it with an angrily-thrown Colloportus, and had heard only a couple of hesitant rattles of the doorknob since her self-imposed exile that morning. She sank back into her chair with fatigue, even as her bum protested another close encounter with the chair, so soon after its reprieve. She really didn't want to face everybody and their sad, tired, pitying demeanors.

I should apologize, she thought. There is every logical reason to believe that Harry is dead. How can I expect them to believe me, when all the proof I have is "I know he's not dead"? I wouldn't believe me either. I sound like Luna Lovegood. She was momentarily distracted as she thought of Luna and Neville, Seamus, Dean, and Hannah, wondering where they were and if they were okay, blessing

Merlin that school had already adjourned for the summer holidays, that the seventh years had already graduated and gone. The Order would probably like to find that out as well, she reprimanded herself. But you want them to go off on some half-baked mission to save someone that may be beyond saving!

Even as she tried to play devil's advocate, she rejected it. No, he is alive. I know it. I know it like I know I'm alive. That unwelcome, unfamiliar emotion was rising in her again, and she swiped her sweaty palms against the softness of her pants.

Just then, the doorknob rattled again, and she heard Ron's voice, a combination of things that made her jump and flush like she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Hermione? Hermione, can you let me in, please? You should eat, and – and we – I want to talk to you." She heard the rattle of cutlery against a tray, and smiled in spite of herself. Pointing her wand over her shoulder, she unsealed the door without looking, her eyes trailing down the parchment to the last idea she'd written down. Her face lit up a bit more. Yes, that little smidge of an idea was rather brilliant.

Ron entered the room, carefully balancing two servings of tea and a plate of sandwiches.

"I'm not really that hungry, but I reckon we have to eat," he said, sitting the tray down, after Hermione raked all her work to one side, beginning to neatly roll the parchment and stack the books. She wrapped her hands around one cup of tea, after she had cleared the space, and savored the warmth that flowed through her hands and up her arms. Ron chose a sandwich, and began listlessly picking at the crust of the bread, something that fairly shouted to Hermione that these were not normal times. She sipped her tea, her dry throat closing gratefully around it.

"Nobody – nobody meant to hurt your feelings, Hermione," Ron began, tentatively, wrinkling his brow with concern. "They were – we were trying – because we have to – " he floundered a bit, and then swore under his breath. "Dammit! Harry was always a sight better at

this kind of crap than I am.” His use of “was” still made Hermione wince, but she forced a smile.

“Neither of you have ever been very proficient at it,” she retorted dryly, but her face grew somber as she returned to the topic at hand. “Ron, I know I sound crazy. But if you ever trusted me, if you ever believed in me, I’m asking you to believe in me now. I know he is alive. And I know the time that we have to find him is running short.” She reached out and took his hand, with wide, pleading eyes. “Voldemort’s torturing him, hurting him. I’ve seen him, covered in blood...screaming...”

Ron was shaking his head, helplessly. “How, Hermione? How could you possibly have seen him?”

Hermione removed her hand from his, clasping both of hers together tightly. She stood up, sat down, then stood up again. “I don’t know, Ron,” she finally said. “I’ve been looking for a good bit of the day, trying to find other phenomena like this.” She shrugged apologetically. “He used Legilimency on me, right before they took him. Maybe that, combined with the high stress we were both under, left some kind of imprint or something. All I know is that I can see him!”

“How do you know it’s not just a memory of him? You’ve seen him upset and hurt plenty of times,” Ron persisted.

“He’s somewhere I’ve never seen before. His shirt is torn, and one eye is swollen shut. His glasses are gone. He’s standing in the center of some kind of ring, like a forcefield, in a stone room – a kind of a cell.” For a moment, she sounded far away, as she recalled details of her visions, but then she snapped back to reality, as she said stubbornly and defiantly. “It is not a memory, Ron!”

Ron had been watching her carefully. “And you say you can feel it – him?”

Hermione lowered her head to her hands. “I know it sounds stupid. I can’t really sense his emotions or his thoughts or anything, but I just – I can just tell that he’s still alive. I swear I’m not making this up, Ron. I’m not crazy or tired or in shock... I know he’s alive!” Ron looked at

her for a long moment, and she met his gaze with pleading, intense eyes.

"I believe you," he finally said, looking at her somberly. She noted how unutterably weary and worn he seemed, and lashed her whips of self-recrimination for unleashing all of this on him today. She smiled at him, a barely there, close-lipped smile.

"Thank you," she whispered softly. There was another long silence.

"What are you going to do?" He asked in a quiet voice, his eyes locked on to his as yet untasted sandwich. Hermione's heart sank when he said "you" instead of "we".

"I'm going to find out where Voldemort is, and I'm going to go after Harry," Hermione said, simply, as if she were proposing an errand to the grocer's to pick up sugar or milk. Their eyes met during the end of her sentence, as her mouth shaped and sounded Harry's name. Hermione's eyes were dark and somber and completely determined; Ron's own blue gaze was almost one of amusement, though the haunted look did not completely vacate the premises. He looked as though Hermione's reply had not surprised him, as if he had been, in fact, expecting something of the sort.

"Just tell me what you need me to do, and I'll do it," he finally said, reaching out and clasping her hand tightly in his. She nodded her thanks, as a watery smile flickered across her face briefly. She looked down at their entwined fingers, and the painful intensity returned. It was like she was physically stretching from the yearning that coursed through her as her blood flowed through her veins, so desperate was her desire to reach out to...Harry.

She blinked, startling suddenly, as if she'd been unceremoniously doused with ice water. She looked at Ron, as if desperate to imprint his face over the image that had invaded her mind without invitation. Ron is the boy I've been dating for almost a year! She scolded herself, as if her betraying subconscious had recently become unaware of that fact. I love my best friend, I miss my best friend, I want him back with me – usHermione had become nearly frantic to deny this thing – this feeling that had probably been present for quite some time, and

she had only now exerted enough attention on it to notice. No, no, no, no, no! She repeated stubbornly to herself, as if she could intimidate the emotion out of existence. I will not be in love with Harry Potter! I refuse!

Ron appeared lost in his own thoughts, his head bowed, his eyes stony and distant, focused toward the faded, worn knees of his jeans. She watched him thoughtfully, feeling the comforting closeness of his fingers lined up with hers. How could I do this to him? She thought mournfully, remaining blissfully and ironically ignorant that she had moved directly from denying the existence of the feelings to plotting what she could do to get rid of them. Her thumb moved lightly over the skin stretched taut over his knuckles. He's already lost so much.

She closed her eyes, and shook her head resolutely. The situation was untenable; her feelings were ridiculous. Harry was missing. Harry needed her help. Everything else was window-dressing, frivolous, irrelevant, ignorable. Any interest in Harry – beyond that of friendship – had no place in her schedule.

She looked at her tea, abandoned on her desk, and by now, quite tepid. Quietly, moving slowly so as to not disturb Ron from his musings overmuch, she disentangled her hand from Ron's and reached for her wand, intending to cast a warming charm on her beverage.

A shriek sounding like it had issued from Tonks brought them both immediately to their feet, exchanging alarmed glances as they flew from the room. Hermione quite forgot about her tea.

Tonks' cry had evidently drawn attention from the others, who had been scattered around the small compound, while I was monopolizing the library, Hermione thought shamefacedly. The Auror was seated at the table in the War Room, hunched over a small object that she clenched so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"Nymphadora!" Remus cried, reaching her side, at about the same time that Hermione and Ron entered the room. Tonks waved one hand wildly at him, obviously indicating that he hush, and leaned even closer to what she held.

“What in the name of Zonko is going on?” Fred asked, as he too arrived, followed by McGonagall. Hermione shushed him, and in the resulting silence, they could hear a voice, though it was tinny and distorted, as if coming from very far away.

“... with you? Is everyone all right?” came a voice, sounding tinny and distorted, as if it had been produced on the other end of a bad phone connection. Hermione started in recognition, and felt Ron’s fingers suddenly clamp tightly around hers.

“We’re okay,” Tonks said, a hedging note obvious in her voice. Hermione finally realized that Tonks was holding a mirror, similar to the two-way mirror that Harry had received from Sirius. “How about you?”

“Dad?” Ron finally ventured, taking a half-step forward, but Hermione grabbed his arm.

“...shouldn’t say more...secure connection...” crackled Mr. Weasley’s tired voice over the mirror. “...someone to let me in, please, Tonks?”

“Absolutely, sir,” Tonks said, in as deferent a tone as she would have used for the Minister himself. The mirror gave a flicker and a crackle as the connection was severed. Ron sank into the nearest chair, burying his face in both hands.

“Thank Merlin,” he said in a muffled voice. There was a sound of rapid footfalls, and everyone turned to see Fred quickly making his way up to the laboratory of the shop to await his father’s arrival. Ron stood, as quickly as he had sat, toppling the chair over backwards, and followed his brother.

“Did he give you any information about the status of the Ministry?” McGonagall asked Tonks, her eyes grave and somber.

“The Minister is dead,” Tonks said, without dissembling. McGonagall’s face grew even grimmer, and Hermione closed her eyes at the new development. She could not admit to any love lost for Scrimgeour, given his behavior toward Harry, but his death definitely wouldn’t make any of their lives any easier. It meant that the

Wizarding government had been effectively beheaded. “Arthur was apparently able to conceal himself after the building had been taken, and on the move all night, hiding from Death Eaters in the closets and back passages and ventilation shafts. He finally got a Auror mirror from – from someone – ” Tonks faltered, and Hermione understood that Mr. Weasley must have removed it from a dead body. “He contacted us as soon as he was able.”

Hermione felt a swamping wave of gratitude that Mr. Weasley had survived. She didn't think Ron or Fred could take much more loss. Almost as if in answer to her thought, she heard the heavy treads of several people, as they made their way down into the Shop. Mr. Weasley entered the room, flanked by his two sons, looking pale and strained. Hermione wondered idly, if they had told him of his family's fate.

“Percy didn't happen to make it here, did he?” he asked, hopefully.

“He didn't know where it was, Dad,” Fred replied gently, and Mr. Weasley sagged a little.

“The Death Eaters were specifically looking for us. I can't think why. They couldn't find Percy either...I was – I was hoping...” he trailed off forlornly.

“Ginny's been hurt,” Ron blurted abruptly. Mr. Weasley looked sharply and searchingly into the eyes of his two sons, and seemed to understand what they weren't telling him.

“Take me to see her,” he ordered quietly, his face stern, his eyes hooded and resolute in the expectation of certain agony. He tossed a crumpled, torn segment of newsprint onto the table. “Nicked that just outside the Ministry,” he said to Remus in an offhand voice, before following Fred and Ron to Ginny's room.

Tonks, Remus, McGonagall, and Hermione quickly gathered around the paper. Hermione smoothed her hands over the wrinkled paper, using her wand absent-mindedly to repair a long shred torn from the side, and saw that it was the front page of the Daily Prophet.

The headline blared: BOY WHO LIVED BELIEVED KILLED;
VOLDEMORT TAKES MINISTRY; THOUSANDS DEAD;
THOUSANDS MORE FLEE.

A small blurb beneath the date read, "Final Issue Until Further Notice."

TBC

Thanks for all the reviews so far. They are much appreciated, but they are an addiction...the more you receive, the more you want!

Hope you enjoyed this chapter!

Chapter Three: Stratagem

Hermione stared somewhat apathetically at the school robes that she had spread out on the lower bunk of the room she would normally be sharing with Ginny. She ran her fingers over the soft black material, and thought somewhat despondently of her alma mater. Had it really only been two weeks since they'd graduated? It seemed more like years. Some of the very soul of Hogwarts had gone out from it with Dumbledore's passing, even though Professor McGonagall had done her best and was a very competent Headmistress. But by then, war and rumors of war had become rampant, like some kind of insidious contagion, and parents had been pulling children from school left and right. Hermione had seen Harry take their incomplete education onto himself as well, adding it to the already prodigious mantle of guilt that he wore.

Hogwarts was dangerous because he was there. And that was why the children left. Hermione suspected that he knew that that was only partially true, but it didn't stop him from feeling badly about it.

She missed Hogwarts. And the way its demise had been brought about made that even more painful. She tried to imagine the drafty stone hallways, punctuated by suits of armor and smart-alecky portraits, now alive with masked Death Eaters, doing some errand or other for the Dark Lord. She imagined the Gryffindor common room, its squashy chairs and roaring fireplaces violated. She wondered what had happened to all the house-elves.

She could see Harry and Ron, hunched over a chessboard, laughing – in one of those light moments, that had become so rare before the end – one of those times when Harry got to remember that he was, in fact, not yet eighteen. Her eyes closed, and the sound that rattled out with her next breath was very nearly a moan of pain.

But when she opened her eyes again, they were level, calm, determined. She lifted her wand, trying to concentrate, trying to remember, and focused all of her not inconsiderable effort, attention, and power on those black school robes lying on her bed. She lengthened the sleeves and enlarged the cowl, tapering both to

dramatic points, ensuring that the folds would swath her form, draping her head so that the features of her face would not be very visible.

When she had finished, she donned the robes, pulling the hood over her tousled curls, immediately casting her face into shadow. Trembling hands tucked her wand into her robe, into a long thin pocket, where she could retrieve it easily. She lifted stoic features to the mirror hanging opposite, and shuddered to see her pale, set face, contrasting quite drastically with the inky robes and heavy hood. She stepped closer to the mirror, studying herself carefully, and completed her work, by casting a mild Distraction charm onto the fabric, a smaller, simpler version of what the Ministry had used at the World Cup. Wizards who were really trying, of course, would be able to overthrow its effects, as well as those that she actually sought out and addressed, but those who weren't expecting anything of the kind would suddenly find their attention drawn to the shop window across the way or the barfight over at the pub.

As she reached the door, she suddenly stopped, reaching beneath her collar with one hand, to clutch at the small key that hung on a golden chain. When she felt the reassuring length of its barrel under her fingers, she sagged visibly. It was the key to Harry's vault at Gringotts that he had given to her last summer. He had told her that he had left everything to her and Ron anyway, so she might as well take it, in case she ever needed it.

The weight of quite a few Galleons hung in her purse, which was concealed beneath the voluminous robes. But she wasn't sure how easy it would be to acquire what she needed to acquire, and one never knew when some 'persuasion' could come in handy. Harry, forgive me, she pled mentally, cringing at the thought of giving Harry's money, giving Lily and James' money to pay off Death Eaters.

Cautiously, she opened the door and peered out. The corridor was shadowy, the only light streaming out from under Ginny's door, and coming from the War Room. Hermione could hear the tinny noise of the Wizarding Wireless, and she marveled momentarily that it was still on the air. She had a sudden vision of commentators hiding in basements and changing locations often, as they had done in occupied countries in the past, but she brushed it away. The question

was: Who was in the War Room, and could she slip by them? Ron is going to kill me! she thought.

And why can't you just tell him? He said he'd do anything you needed him to do, part of her asked.

He just got his dad back. They're in there with Ginny. Can I ask him to leave? Can I ask his father to put one of his last remaining sons in further danger? She slid down the hall, moving soundlessly, hearing the low murmur of male Weasley voices emanate from Ginny's room. They had spent a good deal of time in there, both yesterday when Mr. Weasley had returned, and earlier that morning as well. She paused outside the door, and leaned toward it, straining her ears, in time to hear Mr. Weasley say,

"...so proud of you. Thank you for taking care of your sister, Ron. And I'm – I'm glad you were there w – with your mum when – when – "

Hermione careened away from the door as if she been propelled, brushing furiously at the tears that sprang again to her eyes with the backs of both hands. Dammit! she thought furiously to herself. Whoever saw a crying Death Eater?

"Hermione?" came Tonks' curious voice, just before Hermione stepped into the light that marked the entrance to the War Room. Her pulse rate accelerated to such a rapid pace, that Hermione marveled that Tonks didn't seem to hear it. Her palms became instantly drenched, and she felt the blood surge into her face.

"Hmm?" she managed to call out, not trusting herself to say anything further and avoid her voice wavering or cracking. She quickly tore the hood from her head, as Tonks poked her head out of the door. Perhaps, there in the shadows of the corridor, the robe would not appear to be anything more than just that – a nondescript black wizarding robe of the type that was a dime a dozen.

But her Distraction charm was working, and Tonks suddenly turned back into the room, saying loudly, "Damn! I forgot that I was supposed to – "

Hermione didn't stay to hear the rest. She had fled toward the stairway, mounting it quietly, and emerging from the hidden door into the chaotic clutter of genius in progress that was the Weasley twins' laboratory. Even that somewhat frightful sight caused Hermione a twinge of sadness, as she thought of the half of that dynamic pair that was no more.

She crouched carefully on the floor, and quickly performed the series of spells that would tune her wand to the wards. Only a select few knew these, and the order in which they were performed changed intermittently. With her wand tuned properly, she should be able to pass outside of the wards with no one in the Shop being any the wiser.

Satisfied that she had performed it correctly, she stepped through the door marked 'No Admittance' into the store proper. She was careful to stay out of the line of sight of the windows, three of which were broken, and her black cloak helped her stay nearly unseen in the shadows. She swallowed hard at the scorch marks on the walls, and the way the door had obviously been replaced on its hinges after being blown off. It was hanging rather crookedly, and there were cracks in the plaster surrounding the door frame. Most of the Weasleys' merchandise appeared to be largely intact, but Hermione supposed that a joke shop would be largely ignored, at least in the first days of the chaotic scramble for survival.

She shunned the main entrance, with its repaired door and the tinkly bell above the glass front. It would not do, she thought, to be seen coming from a supposedly abandoned shop owned by a couple of known blood Traitors. Instead, she moved toward the back of the store, stepping carefully so as not to set off anything that would explode, wail, or whistle shrilly. The back door was a non-descript grayish brown, and she rather suspected that it was by this entrance that Arthur Weasley had entered last night, after being let through the wards by Fred. She opened it and stepped through, unconsciously holding her breath as she did so. There was not even a ripple of awareness in the wards; she had adjusted her wand correctly. Even so, she waited for a moment, listening, afraid she would hear some sort of commotion, as what was left of the Order was brought to bear on her. But there was no sound, no motion. As she set her feet into

the gravel of the walkway that ran between the buildings and emptied out into Diagon Alley, she breathed a sigh of relief, shutting the door gently behind her.

She pulled the hood up, the cowl shielding her face from view, as she discreetly merged into the foot traffic of Diagon Alley. Black cloaks of one sort or another abounded everywhere, and there were shouts of crude laughter from several street corners. Florean Fortescue's shop, which had been abandoned for nearly two years, appeared to be quite full, wizards and witches animatedly discussing something. Hermione eyed them with barely concealed loathing; the only wizards who would be out looking for news, eager to hear it, would be those that followed the victor. Ollivander's had been looted – again – and empty and half-crushed boxes were strewn across the muddy surface of the Alley. Here and there, Hermione's sharp eyes noted an abandoned wand, lying discarded among the cobblestones.

Flourish and Blotts had met a similar fate. The window had been blasted out by wandfire, and the door to the bookshop was completely gone. The store looked like it had been partially burned, but books had spilled out of the window display, where they had fallen haphazardly in the street to be stepped on and torn by people who didn't even notice. All of Hermione's sensibilities were outraged, as she stopped to pick up on blue leather-bound book that had landed face down in a particularly sludgy area. The cover had mostly been ripped away from the spine. Without even looking at the title, she tucked it into her robes, after brushing the worst of the mud off of it, vowing to repair it when she returned to the Shop. Half-afraid she'd be caught, she moved hastily away from the store she loved, thinking ridiculously to herself, I just stole a book!

She paused only briefly by the apothecary's shop, which was dark, and appeared to be completely empty. Overturned baskets were piled in the gaping doorway, and the gaily striped awning was torn and hanging raggedly. She was not surprised, and headed where she thought she'd have to go all along.

She hesitated as she reached the entrance to Knockturn Alley, and instinctively reached up to make sure that the hood of her robe was still shading her face. She had correctly assumed that any business

to be done would have to be conducted in Knockturn Alley, while the more upright shop-owners and customers of Diagon Alley would be in hiding or in flight. The people milling about Diagon Alley today were up to more nefarious deeds, she was sure.

She took a deep breath, and plunged down the crooked stairs that led into Knockturn Alley. Almost instantly, the buildings seemed to grow taller and grayer and closer together, appearing to almost loom over the lane in a quite menacing fashion. Ill-dressed folk gathering in the shadows of the stoops and side-streets leered at her from the darkness, and she clutched her robe more closely to her, placing one hand gently over the purse, so that the clink of Galleons would not invite more trouble. She swallowed hard as she was roughly jostled by a hag, hoping to keep her heart out of her throat.

She paused in the middle of the square, as Knockturn Alley opened out in front of her. She recognized Borgin and Burkes, and began to walk slowly, hoping that her eyes weren't too obviously scanning the signs hanging in front of the shops. Her task was made more difficult by the fact that most of the signs were weather-beaten and worn with age, with some of the lettering faded nearly completely away. She continued to stroll, eyes never ceasing to move, as the traffic milled and flowed around her. No one appeared to give her even the slightest bit of notice.

And then she saw it. A faded sign, hanging by only one corner instead of two, with a mortar and pestle, once painted bright red, depicted on it. The legible letters of the sign read "-ecary."

Thank Merlin! Hermione thought to herself, as she cut across the street, hesitating only for a moment, before pushing the door open and entering the shop. A stale smell overpowered everything, as she walked into the dimly lit establishment, heralded by the dull clank of a cowbell fastened over the door. Straw baskets and cauldrons of every conceivable size were scattered here and there, filled with various potions ingredients. Small measuring scoops hung from the containers by thin cords. She appeared to be the only customer in the shop.

“Kin I help ye?” came a rusty old voice. There was a shuffling sound, and a very old woman, bent almost double from a hump on her back, came out of the back of the shop. One eye protruded, while the other was nearly hidden in a wrinkled flap of skin, reminding her uncomfortably of Mad-Eye Moody. A scant handful of yellowy teeth had clacked together when she spoke.

Hermione watched her for a moment, looking for some kind of glint of recognition in the unsettling eyes, but saw none. Still, she felt safer shrouded in the shadows of her robes, and did not lower her hood.

“No, thank you,” she whispered softly, from a throat that suddenly seemed incredibly and impossibly dry. She moved gracefully in and out of the random piles of baskets, occasionally consulting a list, scooping out dry ingredients into small bags, and doling wet ones into glass flasks. She moved to and from the counter, lining up her measured crushed lacewing flies, powdered dragon scales, and milkweed sap, where the old woman began carefully corking up the bottles, weighing them and tallying up the price.

At length, Hermione approached the counter with her last ingredient, she addressed the proprietor.

“Have – have you any vampire fangs?” Her stance was rigid, tense, as if poised for flight. The crone’s sparse eyebrows soared up into her straggly hair.

“Don’t get much call fer vampire fangs,” she remarked, but bent under the counter and pulled out a locked lead box, which she opened with her wand.

“I – I just need two,” Hermione said, her jaw trembling as if she were cold. The old woman shook two bright white, pointy teeth into her wrinkled, rough palm, and locked the box back up. She folded the fangs neatly into a square of brown paper that she then tied with string, and punched a final number into the register.

An impossible number floated above the register in glowing green. Hermione gaped.

“For this?” she said. “You’ve got to be joking.” The woman appeared unfazed, blinking coolly at her customer.

“The fangs alone be a thousand Galleons apiece,” she replied. “And, as fer the others...well, supply an’ demand, dearie. Don’t know when my nex’ shipment’ll even get here, and ol’ Snaggle’s got to eat, ye know. Be rather unsettled times now, though I ‘spect that’ll pass soon enough, now the Dark Lord’s in charge.”

“I – I don’t have that much,” Hermione stammered, cursing her wobbly voice. Snaggle smiled unpleasantly, and her yellow teeth were nearly enough to turn Hermione’s stomach.

“F yer lookin’ fer cheap, then ye’ll want the basket over yon in the corner.” She indicated a wicker container, half as high as Hermione, piled over with coarsely ground off-white material, not dissimilar to crushed marble. “Human bones, that be. Bit of a glut on the market lately. On’y 2 Knuts fer an ounce.”

Hermione wavered visibly on her feet. Human... she thought dully, seeing Bill’s unmoving body being kicked by the Death Eater, hearing Ron’s choked voice as he talked about his mother’s death. She felt the bile rising in her throat, as saliva rushed into her mouth, and knew that she wouldn’t be able to stop it.

“Please hold my order. I’ll be back with your money,” she blurted in a rushed, garbled voice, and fled the store desperately, not even hearing the cowbell, as she plunged through the door, back out into Knockturn Alley. There was a large, moldy-smelling rain barrel at the corner, and she ran to it, clamping her fingers on the damp rim, and depositing the contents of her stomach into it.

Slowly, she stood up, brushing her hands absent-mindedly against her robes, and readjusting her hood around her clammy face. She had a bad taste in her mouth now, and she desperately wanted a drink of water. There were people milling all about, but they were people whose worldview was the polar opposite of hers. She suddenly felt very alone and very vulnerable.

A door clanged open with a heavy metal sound. A crumpled figure hunched in a dim corner looked up at the sound, a weary long-suffering look on his face. It was Harry, although his face had since been rendered nearly unrecognizable.

Hermione clung to the dissipating shreds of her resolve, and held them together through sheer force of will. With renewed purpose in her step, she returned down Knockturn Alley the way she had come, plunging gratefully into the still slightly more palatable air of Diagon Alley, and headed toward the imposing marble edifice of the wizarding Bank.

Gringotts also appeared to be operating normally, but almost everyone within was black-cloaked, and seemed to wear identical sneering expressions. Those fools who had ventured out on normal errands – as if anything could be construed as normal ever again, Hermione sniffed – were quickly dragged to one side, detained, and questioned. Many of them, she surmised, were probably looking for funds to get out of the country, and she wondered if the contents of their vaults would be confiscated.

Even though it felt as if the eyes of everyone in Gringotts' vast lobby rested on her, she managed to walk quickly across the marbled floor to an available representative, her robe billowing out behind her impressively, her footsteps clicking quietly, but decisively, on the stone. Her hood remained up, but her head was held high, and her back was straight, and she hoped that she was giving off some kind of air of authority and entitlement.

"I need to make a withdrawal," she spoke quietly to the goblin in question, and carefully detached the key from its hidden chain. As the goblin's knobbly little fingers closed around the key, and he saw the vault number, he paused for an almost imperceptible moment, clearly surprised – even for a goblin.

He lifted his eyes to hers, and Hermione met his gaze squarely, her lips pressed tightly together, almost pleadingly. His beady black stare flickered over to a knot of Death Eaters, almost immediately returning to her.

“You are ... Miss Claudia Whitaker?” he asked, in an appraising tone, after consulting what Hermione assumed to be some kind of signature card.

“No, I’m Her...mione,” she drew out, lowering her voice until it was practically inaudible. The goblin appeared to have gone momentarily deaf.

“You are Miss Claudia Whitaker?” he repeated, and Hermione suddenly realized what he was doing. She could not help but be impressed. Harry had thought of everything.

“Yes,” she said, and the affirmative came out sounding almost like a question. “Yes,” she repeated more firmly, “I am.”

“This way please,” the goblin said, descending from his high stool, and leading her through the double doors, behind which the carts waited to take the clients on a wild ride. He climbed into the cart, and indicated that she follow him. A dizzying whirlwind and a couple of steep climbs and steeper dives brought them to the Potter family vault. Hermione clambered from the cart, testing her legs carefully, and stood before the metal door, somehow feeling unworthy of being there.

“It is fortunate that you came today, Miss...Whitaker,” the goblin offered, startling Hermione by speaking so plainly. “It would be...wise...if you did not come again. Perhaps you would wish to close out your account?”

Hermione had slid the key home, as the goblin spoke, and, as he asked his last question, the tumblers clanked, and the vault door opened. Hermione was amazed at the vast quantity of gold that was arrayed before her, not including artifacts, old paintings, and chests – of what, Hermione could only speculate.

“I’m not prepared to – to take this today,” she said, and almost immediately heard Ron’s derisive voice say, Are you a witch, or aren’t you? The goblin agent had evidently not even seen this comment as worth replying to, because he merely raised his stubby arms over his head, and brought his hands toward each other, clapping them

together with a sound that managed to echo disproportionately loudly in the cavernous tunnels.

There was a rumble and a large puff of dust that set Hermione to coughing. When she looked up, the vault had simply disappeared, and she squeaked in astonishment. At her feet, approximately the size of one of those hotel safes esconced in suite closets, was the entire Potter vault. She looked at the goblin for permission, and he nodded. She drew her wand, and shrank the vault further, until it was about the size of small paperweight, and slid it into her purse, where it tinkled lightly among the Galleons.

She climbed back into the cart, somewhat bewildered, and justifiably so, she thought. Before the wagon plunged off into the abyss, she took one last look at the rough stone alcove that gaped where the Potter vault had once been. Taking news of that back to Voldemort is going to get some Death Eater killed, she mused, with unabashed glee.

When they once again screeched to a halt, Hermione paused before the double doors that would lead her back into the lobby, adjusting her hood more securely around her head and face.

"We appreciate your business, Miss Whitaker," the goblin said blandly, surprising Hermione by taking her hand and shaking it firmly. "We hope you will return...when days are...improved." Hermione nodded at him gravely, and stepped back into the brighter environment of the lobby, feeling somewhat heartened. The goblins might not have felt either able or willing to declare themselves for one side or the other, but she had gotten the distinct impression that they were not at all backing Lord Voldemort. She felt the heft of the shrunken vault in her bag, and smiled again.

"Be assured of it," she told him, and exited. The walk across the lobby did not seem so long this time, and she forced herself to keep her stride natural, even though she very nearly wanted to break into a run.

Her Distraction charm seemed to be doing its job, and a few moments later, she was entering Snaggle's Apothecary once again.

"There she is!" the old crone cried gaily, causing Hermione to start with alarm, but she was again the only customer present.

"I told you I'd be back," Hermione replied stiffly, angry at being startled. "Did you hold my order?"

"Did more'n that, dearie," said Snaggle, the bulbous eye rolling significantly toward Hermione. "Even packaged it up fer ye, all tidy like." She indicated a brown paper parcel, tied with twine. Hermione reached into her purse, opened the tiny vault, and pulled out a pile of miniature Galleons, spilling them carelessly across the counter.

As she shrank the parcel, and tucked it in beside the vault, Snaggle tapped the Galleons with her wand, causing them to expand to normal size, and rain off of the counter with a sound like wind chimes. Her slimy teeth clacked together with joy, as her mismatched eyes lit up avariciously.

Hermione had turned to go, when Snaggle spoke again.

"Lookin' fer som'un, are ye?" Hermione froze, stood unmoving for a moment, and turned slowly back to the old shop owner. The younger witch fixed the hag with a look that, had it been directed at any Gryffindors, would have sent them shrieking for the nearest escape route.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked, in the loftiest tone she could manage, her cloak billowing around her.

"Yer ingredients," the old witch babbled. "Fer a Locator Potion, i'n't it? Ye'll do better to bathe a divinin' rod in it."

"I'm not dowsing for water!" Hermione said, more sharply than she intended, and Snaggle chuckled hoarsely, as she bent under her counter again, surfacing with a forked willow branch.

"I'm just tellin' ye what I know," she said, with a shrug. "Dip the divinin' rod into the potion once it's finished brewin'. Be a sight more accurate than yer wand."

“How – how much is it?” Hermione asked faintly, and the old witch named a price that was outrageous, but not exorbitant. She fished the additional Galleons from her purse, and handed them to Snaggle. Then she heard a sound that made her heart beat a quick tattoo, and then stop altogether.

The cowbell above the door to the shop rattled loudly. Even as Hermione closed her hands around the willow rod and turned, she was aware of indistinct black-cloaked figures rushing toward her.

“Bout time ye got here,” Snaggle addressed the newcomers in an accusing voice, and for an instant, Hermione, ridiculously, felt betrayed. She froze for only half a moment, like a deer in headlights, and fled for the back of the shop, guessing that Snaggle had erected anti-Apparation wards, and not wanting to waste time testing the theory. She skidded around a narrow corner, colliding loudly with an uneven stack of crates and baskets. The tower toppled around her, and she ducked, trying to shield her head with her arms. Dust, small mushrooms, and some kind of unidentifiable powder rained down on her. She knocked one remaining crate heedlessly out of her way, and stepped on something firm and round that made a squelching noise. I don’t even want to know, she thought, pushing the rest of the way through the crowded storeroom to the back door, overturning containers and scattering ingredients willy-nilly in her wake. She slid through the rickety wooden door, swinging loosely on its hinges, allowed herself one deep breath, and eyed the Death Eaters stationed at the mouth of the alleyway. They had not yet seen her. A clatter and string of curses inside the building indicated that the other Death Eaters had found the mess she’d made.

She took two tentative steps toward the alley, preparing to bolt for it if she needed to, and felt the shiver of power as she stepped through the anti-Apparation wards. Thank Merlin! she thought, lifting her eyes heavenward, briefly. Snaggle had made an error in not extending the wards to the where the small side alley emptied into Knockturn. But then, the Death Eaters had also obviously expected her to try to force her way out through the front door.

The tumult inside grew louder, and Hermione quickly visualized her destination, and Apparated away.

She rematerialized in the alley running alongside Flourish and Blotts. If anyone had a method of following her somehow, she did not want to lead them to the Shop. She stood for a moment, crouching in the slanting shadows beside the building, to catch her breath. She fluttered her hands slightly, as if willing her heartbeat to slow down. Diagon Alley was not really the Diagon Alley she knew and felt comfortable in, she thought, watching the long strip of striped awning flutter in the breeze, but it was a sight better than Knockturn Alley.

She did a quick inventory of herself, making sure she still had her purse, and that her ingredients were still tucked safely beside the Potter vault. Her hood, robes, and the ends of her hair were tinged gray-white, from the coating of powder that she had dislodged onto herself, and she brushed at it half-heartedly, not willing to spend any more time in even this sheltered location. Taking a deep breath, she re-entered Diagon Alley.

She circled through various back alleys for a while, all the time keeping her eyes on Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. The door hung crookedly, reset on its hinges, and the jagged windows looked like gapped, crooked teeth. Nothing moved anywhere near it. She wound her way closer, unwilling to approach it directly from Diagon Alley itself, and finally made her way to the utilitarian rear door, quickly tuning her wand with shaky fingers, and passing through the wards.

She retraced her steps back through the store, and silently entered the Weasleys' lab. She pointed her wand straight up at the ceiling, and quickly muttered the incantation that would reveal the hidden door. A door-shaped section of wall rippled behind what appeared to be a large metal rack full of bottles and boxes. She reached through the rack, and groped blindly until her hand hit something that felt the approximate size and shape of a door handle. She wrenched it open, and the door passed harmlessly through the rack, it being a mere illusion, as she moved to step through the door onto the wooden steps leading down to the Shop.

She nearly tripped over Ronald Weasley, who was sitting hunched on the top step. She closed her eyes, with an expression of something like pain, as he stood slowly, and closed the door behind her. Oh,

damn! She thought, realizing that she probably looked inexpressibly guilty.

"Where the hell have you been?" Ron asked, his face flushing nearly as red as his hair.

"What the hell were you doing sitting there?" she argued back, feeling incredibly defensive. "I could've broken my neck. Are you trying to get me killed?"

"No, I think you're the one trying to do that!" he shot back.

"I went to the bank!" she retorted, and Knockturn Alley; got chased by some Death Eaters, her guilty subconscious added.

"By yourself?" Ron was incredulous.

"You were busy!" she said angrily, and then felt badly. Her comment wasn't at all fair. He had been visiting with his father who was miraculously alive, and his injured sister. And she hadn't even actually asked him.

They had descended the stairs, during their exchange, and Hermione now found herself in the War Room, facing everyone else in the Shop, save Ginny. She turned flashing, defiant eyes toward them, knowing that she had gone about this all the wrong way, but still feeling inclined to rationalize her actions.

"You went to the bank?" Tonks asked in a disbelieving tone, aping the casual way in which Hermione had said it. Hermione unfastened her robes, and draped them carelessly over the back of a chair, and lifted her purse strap over her head. She opened the purse, and dumped the contents of it onto the surface of the table. Galleons clattered everywhere, and the small cube rolled over twice, finally coming to rest with a small thud.

"I got Harry's vault," she said mulishly. All eyes went to the cube lying innocuously on the table.

“That’s his vault?” Ron asked, reaching for it, and flipping open the tiny door with two clumsy fingers. The minute key still rested inside the lock. He paused, staring at it, and lifted his eyes back to Hermione. “Where did you get his key?”

“He gave it to me last summer. In case anything happened.” Ron was eying her with an odd, speculative look, but she didn’t have time to ponder the meaning of it, because Remus was speaking.

“You walked into Gringotts, announced that you wanted access to Harry Potter’s vault, identified yourself, and then just waltzed out with his entire fortune?” he said, punctuated his statement, with an incredulous laugh.

“The goblins are discreet, you know that,” Hermione told him, lifting her chin stubbornly. “He recognized the vault number. Harry’s name was never spoken. And he had signed me onto his account with an alias. He is not an idiot. And neither am I!”

Ron muttered something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like, “Could’ve fooled me.”

“Can’t we use it? Won’t this make things easier?” Hermione looked at them all in turn, pleading with them to understand her. “You know he won’t mind.”

“Hermione, that’s not the point,” Tonks said gently.

“Then what is the point?” Hermione asked, her voice beginning to sound frazzled. She had walked a long way today, while wound up like a mainspring, and she was really very tired.

“You’re a person that we all love very much,” Remus said. “You’re also incredibly intelligent, an excellent fighter, and a brilliant witch. We need you, your talents are vital, but we also don’t want ... any more loss. Running all over Diagon Alley two days after Voldemort smashes the Ministry is not the way to ensure your survival.”

His words were also gently spoken, but Hermione steeled herself against them, squaring her shoulders resolutely.

“So, we’re back to that again, are we? This fight – us – we’re more important than Harry? I’ve got news for you, if we’re going to win this thing, nothing is more important than getting Harry back!” Remus’ arms hung loosely at his sides, as he looked at her helplessly. Tonks and Professor McGonagall exchanged glances. They appeared to be thinking that it would be pointless to once again argue with Hermione about the probability – or lack thereof – that Harry was still alive. And they would be right! Hermione thought vehemently.

“Look, I’m sorry that I left without telling anybody,” she finally said. “I will not go anywhere else, without letting someone know. But I will not let you deny me this. I know he’s alive, and I know that we don’t have much time left. He – he wants to give up...but he hasn’t yet.” She thought briefly of her vision of him earlier that day, and the tired look of “again?” stamped across his battered features. “I’m going to find him.” She infused her words with a simple dignity that made it difficult for the other Order members to look her in the face. “I’ve got work to do,” she added, wearily, and turned for the sanctuary of the library.

“What’s that in your hand?” Fred asked suddenly, calling Hermione’s attention to the forgotten willow stick that she still held. She looked down at it distractedly.

“It’s a divining rod,” she said, as if it were patently obvious, but offered no further details. She paused by Mr. Weasley’s chair, and laid one hand gently on his shoulder. “It’s good to see you again, sir,” she said warmly, and Mr. Weasley reached up his hand to cover hers, patting it gently, in his usual abstracted way. She wondered idly if his hair had always had so much gray in it.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ron stoop down and pick something up from among the pile of Galleons littered across the floor. As she strode down the hallway, she heard Tonks admonish Fred against enlarging the vault until they had dug a place out for it.

Her hand was resting lightly on the doorknob to the library, when she heard Ron’s familiar tread in the hall. She looked at him questioningly, but he didn’t speak until they were both shut inside the library.

“The bank wasn’t the only place you went, was it?” he asked, almost accusingly, and tossed a small object onto her desk, before she could even reply. Her eyes widened as she recognized the small brown twine-wrapped parcel that she had completely forgotten about, while dumping out her purse.

“I went to the apothecary,” she said stiffly, keeping her eyes on the shiny surface of her desk.

“In Diagon Alley?” he asked innocently, and she risked a look at him. His face was carefully bland. He already knows that shop was completely emptied by looters! She thought in annoyance, Fred probably told him.

“I think you know good and damn well where I went,” she said sharply, her color rising.

“You went to Knockturn Alley? Today? Hermione, are you crazy?” His voice rose with each successive sentence. Her dark eyes flashed at him dangerously.

“What else was I supposed to do? I needed these ingredients!” she nearly shouted back.

“It isn’t safe!” he protested back, as red as she was.

“Nothing is safe anymore! Don’t you get it, Ron? It’s not safe! And it never will be safe again, unless we stop this! And the only way we’re going to stop this is – ”

“Harry.” He interrupted, finishing for her dully. She looked at him sharply, searching his face with discerning eyes.

“You said you believed me,” she stated calmly, in a voice of quiet accusation.

“I do believe you, Hermione,” he said in a heartfelt tone, looking at her with anguish.

"You have a funny way of showing it," she replied, more quietly still. Ron appeared to be thinking quite hard about what exactly to say next. He shifted his weight forward in his chair, and reached across the gap separating them, taking both of her hands in his.

"I don't want anything to happen to you." He said, so seriously and sincerely that Hermione felt her throat close up. "I – I don't think I could take it if something were to happen to you."

"Ron, I have to do this," she said in a trembling voice.

"Why?" It burst out of him suddenly, startling them both. "Why can't you let somebody wh – who's trained for this look for him? Why – why can't – " He realized where he was going and stopped abruptly, clamping his mouth shut.

"Why can't I let him go?" Hermione asked accusingly. "Is that what you were going to say?" He tried to protest, but she overrode him. "Why can't I let him go?"

"Hermione, that's not what I meant," he finally broke in wearily.

"I stood out on the Hogwarts green, and watched every Order member except me and Harry die. I watched them take Harry. I watched them, knowing that every hope of the wizarding world would die with him, if he died. I was ready, Ron!" Her voice shook again, and her eyes were vague and distant. She thought of the crumpled bodies on the grass, and then – unwillingly – thought of the wicker basket in Knockturn Alley filled with whitish powder. Bit of a glut on the market lately. "I was ready to run out in the middle of them, to see how many I could kill before they killed me! And Harry told me not to. Even then, he was thinking of me, of you, of the rest of the Order! He is my best friend, my first friend, the one who made you – " here she twisted a smile at Ron – "help him save me from the troll. And I I – " she stopped, suddenly fearful of what she had nearly admitted out loud, and to Ron, no less. "And I owe him this. I owe him my life. If you were seeing what I've seen: Harry beaten to a bloody pulp, Harry screaming, bleeding, trying not to give in. Who knows what they're doing to him? If you saw it, you'd know – you'd know why I feel the way I do!"

Ron slanted an odd look at her. "Would I?" he asked cryptically. Hermione blinked at him, confused, and he waved it off with a "never mind" gesture.

"They are looking for us," she blurted suddenly, and, hoping he wouldn't get angry again, she quickly related her tale of the Death Eaters coming after her in the apothecary shop, omitting the grisly exchange about the bones.

"Dad said they were specifically looking for him and Percy at the Ministry," Ron recalled suddenly.

"They want us – anybody who's close to Harry," Hermione said. "For one thing, I think they know that we'd never knuckle under to Voldemort, that we would always fight him. But they want us to get to Harry. Voldemort wants Harry to break before he dies." Ron nodded, deep in thought.

"I guess that makes sense," he replied, after a moment. "Harry would probably defy Voldemort all day long, just to piss him off. But if – if he – " he suddenly seemed to have trouble speaking, but forced the words out anyway, "If Voldemort did – did anything to you, then – then – I don't know what it would do to Harry." Or you, Hermione thought fondly, as she looked at his rangy frame, hunched pensively in the chair.

"We don't have much time," Hermione added, speaking in a business-like tone. "Professor McGonagall was right. Voldemort's not going to want to risk keeping Harry alive. In fact, I'll wager that Voldemort hasn't even seen him up close yet; he's probably having his little stooges do all the dirty work. And he probably has him behind some kind of magical dampening field, so Harry can't do any..." she was speaking in that absent way she did, when she was essentially thinking out loud. "Yes! I'm sure of it. There was a glowing green ring in the floor, and Harry was standing in the middle of it."

"So when do we leave?" Ron asked, and Hermione smiled at him gratefully.

"I've got to brew up this Locator Potion. The shop owner said it would work better if we soaked a divining rod in it, rather than a wand, but I don't know if she was telling the truth, or just stalling me while the Death Eaters arrived," Hermione mused. "Anyway, I figured we'd try the Riddle house first – just to get it out of the way – I don't really think he's there. And then we ought to try the Malfoy and Lestrangle estates first." She looked up suddenly, her eyes wide with alarm, as though she'd forgotten something. "We need ward detectors – strong ones too. I could have found them today – I know someone in Knockturn Alley had to have had them. I totally forgot...I should have put them on my list, but I thought I could remember one thing like ward detectors. I can't believe I – " She was rattling on without taking a breath. Ron stopped her.

"I'll get the ward detectors," he said. Worry blurred Hermione's features.

"Ron, I – "

"Let me take care of it," he insisted, in that same assuring voice. "Okay? Are we going to go looking tomorrow?" Hermione nodded and shrugged in a way that said, "well, I had hoped so." Ron looked at his watch.

"Then I'd better hurry," he said casually, rising to his feet. "I'll take Fred, and Harry's cloak. Can I borrow yours as well?" he asked, referring to the one still draped over the chair in the War Room.

"Of course," she hastily assented in a distracted murmur. She looked up at him suddenly, spearing him with a knowing look in her dark eyes. "Ron, you don't have to do this." He looked back at her, and smiled, one corner of his mouth turning up quirkily.

"Course I do," he responded, with fake heartiness that was only slightly obvious. One corner of his mouth turned up in an actual smile. "It's for Harry, isn't it? You know I'd do anything for Harry." He quietly exited the library, and Hermione was left to wonder if Ron somehow meant more than just getting the ward detectors and rescuing their best friend. She sat alone in the library, a troubled expression on her pretty, intelligent face.

TBC

Wow! I got this whole chapter out in two really long marathon writing sessions. I almost couldn't type fast enough. That being said, I hope it's decent!

All reviews are appreciated so, so, so much; please leave one on your way out! Many thanks!

Chapter Four: Search

Hermione managed to scrawl busily on her latest roll of parchment for about an hour after Ron left. It was then that restless agitation overtook her, and she was unable to continue sitting still. She paced the library idly, seemingly unsure what to do with her hands; first they were in her pockets, then crossed over her chest, then running through her hair, making it arc back from her forehead in even wilder spirals than usual. She sat back at the desk, fingers clamping instinctively around the quill, but she would bounce upward from the seat before she could write a single word.

Strangely enough, while she was concerned for Ron and Fred, off on their errand for her, and hoped that they would come back from it safely, it was Harry with whom her thoughts were consumed, nearly to the distraction of all else. Perhaps that isn't so strange after all, she admitted derisively to herself.

She sat in her chair again, but this time, paid no attention to the writing materials arranged neatly on the desk. Instead, she forced shaky hands to fold themselves in her lap, and tried to think on exactly what Harry meant to her...

Harry...It was easier said than done, she reflected. He was so tangled up with her that she could hardly discern where she left off and he began. His omnipresence was amazing, exhilarating, undeniable. She recalled the fear and determination that warred in his face, when he and Ron had barreled through the lavatory door to see the troll turning the stalls into matchwood, or the radiant relief that lit up his features when she appeared in the Great Hall after the mandrake draught had restored her from her Petrified state. She saw his concerned face hovering above hers, as she coughed up water and pushed streaming hair out of her face after the Second Task. She thought of how he'd returned to the common room after that Quidditch game he'd missed last year, how the expression of defeat and humiliation and shame had melted into exultation when he'd realized that Gryffindor had won, how he'd swept Ginny up into his arms and...

She grabbed the quill again and had it poised over the parchment, but froze. A blob of ink slowly bubbled up from the nib, was pulled downward by its own weight, and made a small splat on her paper. Her fingers were clenched so tightly around the quill that her knuckles were white. She didn't want to think about that.

And why not? Part of her asked snidely. She wouldn't answer that, she wouldn't, not even to herself. She thought of Harry's beaten, swollen features and his defiant eyes. She thought of Ginny, fighting with the Order in Hogwarts, now lying so pale and still in a small bunker bedroom. Fighters, both of them, fighting the only way they could. And what was she doing? She, who had lived through the horrendous loss of life with hardly a scratch, was sitting in a library, writing. What had really changed? But that line of thought wasn't profitable at all, she chastised herself, trying to shake off the self-pity. You're fighting just as much as they are, in your own way. She squeezed her eyes shut, opened them again, and abruptly arose from the chair again. Where were Ron and Fred?

Do you think you don't deserve him? The voice chided again. Do you think others are more deserving than you, because they're braver, more athletic, more vivacious? You've been all things to him and for him.

All things...she sighed glumly, except what he really wanted. The picture of Harry kissing Ginny replayed itself, the very image seemingly emblazoned on her memory. She could not help but watch the scene play itself out.

But last summer, it had been Ginny who was left behind and Harry who had willingly left her. It had been she, Hermione, who had accompanied Harry on his quest for the horcruxes, along with Ron. She remembered looking back at the Burrow, as the three of them strolled down the lane toward the Apparation point. Ginny was standing there, framed by the window, watching them, her face set like flint. The baby sister, the tagalong, left behind once again. For an instant, Hermione had felt sorry for her. And the tiny little tendril of relief that had then unfurled in Hermione's stomach? Well, it was simply gladness that as few people would be endangered as possible.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head, not even really believing herself.

And then there's Ron, she thought glumly. After all the drama of sixth year, they had finally acceded to the inevitable, beginning a relationship in the short interval of time between the end of term and Bill's wedding. (She briefly wondered where Fleur had been during and following the battle.) But after the wedding, it was time to hunt for horcruxes. In a very calm and detached manner, Hermione had explained to Ron why their relationship needed to be put on the back burner, why nothing could come before their need to be there for Harry, aiding him in whatever way possible. Ron had looked slightly disgruntled, but had understood – if not exactly agreed with – the reasoning behind her decision. They had fallen back into their old routine easily, good friends who bickered and occasionally held hands or – more rarely still – kissed, though it hadn't gone much beyond that. She was startled to realize that she had been quite content with that, though she got the impression that Ron had been biding his time, and rather impatiently at that.

And now? With her – whatever this was – for Harry? Had it always been there and she just didn't realize? It can't happen. I can't do this to Ron. I can't do this to Ginny. The timing is wretched, and how I feel doesn't matter. Even as she conceived and gave birth to these silly, selfless thoughts in her head, she felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. She realized with astonishment that she didn't want to give them up, give him up. She wanted ... she wanted...

She sat down again, and pulled the chair up so roughly that it scraped noisily across the floor, and was close enough to the edge of the desk to nearly cut off her air supply. She berated herself fiercely for succumbing to teenage melodrama when all of their lives were at stake. Harry needs me, she thought, and it doesn't matter how I feel about him, even if he did feel the same way, which he doesn't. I can't fail him.

Renewed zeal zapped her eyes with an extra gleam, and she resumed writing with fervor. Time flowed by unheeded, and she knew it must have been very late indeed, when the soft rasp of the library door opening signaled Ron's return. He sat in the adjacent chair with

a distinct air of fatigue, throwing the hood of the black cloak back over his shoulders, not even bothering to unfasten it.

He looked very tired out by their ordeal, his appearance made more foreign by the fact that his hair was glamour-charmed to be a chestnut brown. He rolled his eyes upward to follow her gaze, and said,

“Fred reckoned we were a bit too recognizable.” Ruefulness danced across his face, but there was something else, something he was not telling her. He muttered a quick finite incantatem, tapping himself on the head with his wand, and restored his hair to its original ginger.

“How did it go?” she asked, twisting around in her chair, and leaning toward him in anxiety.

“Oh, we got the ward detectors, if that’s what you mean,” Ron said, in a deliberately off-hand way, refusing to meet her eyes. She gave him a steely glare, but he still would not look at her. She settled for slamming a book down on the desk, with such force that he jumped.

“Ronald Weasley, you are the most pathetic excuse for a liar that anyone ever saw! Now, will you tell me what’s going on, or am I going to have to hex it out of you?” He gave her a dark look that seemed to say, you’re going to be sorry you asked, but heaved a great sigh, and began speaking.

“Fred talked to this shop-owner in Knockturn Alley – where we got the ward detectors –” he added for clarification. “Fred was really amazing. I mean, he’s really got a lot of nerve. He just waltzed into that shop like he bought Dark artifacts every day, and talked to that bloke like they were best mates. I was – I was – I was afraid I’d wet myself,” he admitted with chagrin, and Hermione felt a reluctant smile tug at her lips. “At any rate, he let slip that there was some big news expected to be revealed at this pub down at the end of the alley, and he was closing up his shop early to go hear what it was. So Fred and I decided –”

“Oh, you did not! Ron!” Hermione chided indignantly, looking both fearful and perturbed.

“Will you just hush and listen?” Ron returned, looking at Hermione with something like sympathy, which frightened her more than anything else he’d said or hinted at so far. “So – so we went down there, and the Death Eaters were having some kind of – some kind of party.” The disgust was evident in his tone and on his face. Hermione felt revulsion cloud her features as well. They’d both heard of those revels that Death Eaters had, those Hedonistic orgies where terrible, unspeakable acts occurred. “I mean, it wasn’t quite like one of those,” he added, reading the look on her face. “It was right out in public and everything, but all of the Death Eaters and their hangers-on seemed right jollied up about something. We – we thought it would be useful...if we could find out what it was.”

“You went inside, didn’t you?” Hermione asked, torn between anger and admiration. She tried to imagine walking right up to a Death Eater celebration, like you owned the place, and couldn’t see herself pulling it off. Ron shrugged in response to her question.

“We barely made it in. It was worse than the World Cup for people crammed up against each other. And – and they – they weren’t really the most savory sort of people either. Anyway, they started talking about their great victories, and everyone was cheering every other word, and raising tankards, and firewhiskey was sloshing everywhere. They were just so damn happy!” Ron’s face worked, as he struggled to continue, and Hermione was filled with a renewed compassion at how hard it actually had to have been for both him and Fred to watch people gloat openly over the deaths of their family. “Then some bloke climbed up on the counter, and started blathering on about the ‘munificence of the Dark Lord’, or some such rot, and then – then he mentioned Harry.”

Their eyes met, and Ron seemed to regard her solemnly for quite a while. Hermione had felt every joint and sinew in her body go rigid when Ron said his name. She could hear her pulse beating in her ears, to the exclusion of almost all else. What if he’s dead? He can’t be dead. Please don’t let Ron say they said he’s dead. The rhythmic litany repeated itself over and over in her head.

“He talked a lot of rubbish about the Prophecy and how he never doubted that the Dark Lord would prevail, and how could anyone believe that a snotty little Mudblood spawn – ” Here he looked at Hermione apologetically, and she waved at him to continue. “ – spawn would – would ever be any kind of challenge to such a great and all-encompassing wizard as Lord Voldemort. He said that the only surprise was that it hadn’t happened sooner.”

“That – that what hadn’t happened, Ronald?” Hermione croaked, her eyes suddenly feeling dry and red. Pending tears burned the oversensitive tissues. Ron looked at her again, and suddenly reached for her hand, clasping her cold fingers between his.

“He’s not dead, Hermione,” he said softly. “Voldemort’s holding him, just like you thought. He wants to make a big public display of his death. Show everyone in the Wizarding World that all hope is lost.” Ron made an abrupt movement with one hand, as if he were brushing his hair out of his eyes. Hermione’s hand went limp in Ron’s, as if she’d forgotten that he was even there at all.

“He hasn’t broken Harry yet... so he’s going to kill him in front of everybody,” Hermione said with horrible certainty. “Dear God.” She stared off into middle distance for a long time, with tears brimming in her eyes. “When are they bringing him?” she asked hoarsely, forcing the words painfully from her throat. It seemed obvious to her that Voldemort would bring him to London, along with a full complement of Death Eaters, and kill him, perhaps in the Ministry itself. Maybe in front of that nice statue that replaced the one they destroyed, Hermione thought dismally. Ron looked as if he were in total agony, but confirmed her supposition, shaking his head with dejection.

“They didn’t say when.” Hermione appeared to waver for a moment, and was obviously fighting back total hysteria.

“I was hoping to test some of my theories before we started in the morning,” she said, looking at Ron with a slack and hopeless countenance. Her voice sounded almost disinterested. “But now we don’t have any time left at all. We’ve got to go.”

Ron looked momentarily torn, as if there were a thousand questions that he'd like to ask first, but he did not speak, except to say,

"All right, Hermione."

The last fragment of the Order gathered in the War Room at Hermione's request. She could see the disapproval on the adults' faces, which dissipated somewhat after hearing Ron and Fred's tale.

"Don't you see?" Hermione pleaded. "I was right; he is alive! But there's no time left. You know as well as I do that once Voldemort brings him to London..." She trailed off, but there was no need for her to finish. The place where they had him would be warded as if held the crown jewels. Every Death Eater there would converge on the location to celebrate the victory, and they would all have been instructed to watch for the Order members that were as yet unaccounted for. They would have no chance in hell. "I think that the Death Eaters are mainly here and at Hogsmeade and Hogwarts. They've been deployed so they can hold the positions they've won. I don't think there will be many at a manor in the middle of nowhere watching a boy wizard who's being held behind a magical dampening field."

"How many is not many?" Remus finally asked, clearing his throat a little. Nobody asked how Hermione knew he was behind a magical dampening field.

"I don't think it'd be more than fifteen," she answered him seriously.

"Fifteen?" Tonks burst out with incredulity. "So the three of you are going to take on fifteen Death Eaters?" Her eyes flickered quickly from Ron to Fred to Hermione. The three younger people exchanged guilty glances.

"Like hell you are!" Remus and Mr. Weasley said, nearly in unison, and earning, despite the gravity of the situation, a reproving look from Professor McGonagall.

"Well...no, actually we're splitting up," Hermione stammered, looking askance at both of the men. "We don't have enough time to

investigate everything together. We – if one of us finds something, we're going to go get the others."

"How are you going to do that? You won't know where the other ones are!" Tonks replied, sounding angry. Hermione reached into her pocket and pulled out a tangled handful of medallions, which tinkled together softly as they swung from the chains she held.

"I made these. They're keyed to individuals. If we think of the person wearing it, we'll Apparate directly to that person, regardless of where they are." Tonks looked grudgingly impressed, and a reluctant smile played around the edges of Lupin's mouth. "Regardless of wards. I made one for everybody." Hermione looked around uncertainly, as if unsure whether or not the others would accept the medallions.

"Well, of course, we're coming to help you," Tonks said reassuringly. "You're going to need all the help you can get, graduated from Hogwarts or not, and – "

"Someone will need to stay with Ginny," Professor McGonagall said quietly, and Hermione felt a sudden pang of guilt that she had forgotten all about her housemate and friend. She watched the color slowly drain from Ron's face– and less dramatically – from Fred's face as well.

"I'll stay with her," Mr. Weasley said in a soft, distracted voice, looking again, as Hermione had noticed earlier, somehow very gray and very old.

"You don't have to come with us." Hermione said suddenly, holding up her hands as if she were going to warn someone off, or placate them. "You'll need to – " she stopped suddenly, looking abashed, as if she did not want to be the one giving orders to these people, all of whom had much more experience fighting the Dark Arts than she did.

Tonks was looking at her with something like understanding, in contrast to her more hostile attitude previously, and she nodded once at Hermione, before speaking herself.

“What will we need to do, Hermione?” she asked placidly, causing everyone else in the room to look at her with poorly disguised surprise. Hermione felt rather flummoxed herself.

“Well – I thought, that is – we – we don’t know how much time we have left. And I would think it wouldn’t be much at all. There’s so much ground to cover, and if – if by chance – if we do get Harry back, then you know – he – he’s going to be really angry, and if we thought the other battles were bad, then with – ” She stumbled suddenly to a halt, but her implications were clear. Then imagine how bad it’ll be with a Voldemort who’s already taken over everything looking for a pitiful ragtag band of fighters, with a score to settle.

“We need to find others,” Tonks finished for her, the analytical Auror training, reaching the conclusion before Hermione could do so verbally.

“Others?” Lupin and Ron said together.

“Augusta Longbottom,” Mr. Weasley said wearily. “Neville. Maybe the Lovegoods.. Fleur...” he heaved a weak sort of sigh as he spoke his daughter-in-law’s name. “Other people on our side, scattered or perhaps disconnected because of the war.” Hermione wanted to smile at the cautious light of hope that dawned in Ron’s eyes. Had he really thought that they would be the only ones left? Wouldn’t you, if half your family had been wiped out in one day? She felt instantly contrite about her light thought.

“If we’re going to relocate, then we should find as many people that we know to be trustworthy as we can. Before the wrath of Voldemort falls on us all,” Hermione said darkly. “And it surely will, if we take away his prize.”

Tonks appeared torn between admiration and worry for them. Hermione knew she was still seeing them as the schoolchildren she’d first met a few years ago, and was struggling against that instinct.

“I sure hope you know what you’re doing,” she said quietly, but Hermione felt a surge of gratitude and love for her acceptance of what they were attempting. To cover up this sudden upwelling of

emotion, Hermione began to briskly hand out the medallions, engraved with individual names, which each Order member promptly donned, concealing it beneath his or her clothing.

Ron shouldered the bag he'd been holding loosely in his hand, swinging it up and over his head to rest across the breast of his battered black traveling cloak. Hermione and Fred each had one as well, and pulled over their shoulders in much the same manner. She wore the black cloak she'd transfigured for her trip to Diagon Alley. Inside each satchel resided some food, water, and a small row of corked potions for healing, tucking in securely by a roll of bandages. Nobody spoke as the three younger Order members solemnly regarded the elder.

"Ron! The detectors!" Hermione exclaimed suddenly, her hand flying up to wave about frantically with remembrance. Ron flushed a little, and hastily dug something out of the pockets of his robes, tossing one each to Hermione and Fred, and clipping the small metal band near the tip of his wand. These would not enable them to get past wards, but merely detect them before they walked into them, thus activating them and notifying someone. Hopefully, the detectors would also help in identifying and subsequently dismantling the wards. "Did you get the object you wanted used as your portkey?" she asked, looking at the two Weasley boys. They exchanged glances.

"And just what do you think Death Eaters are going to do if they find an old tin can in my pack?" Ron asked.

"I didn't say it had to be rubbish," Hermione replied, looking affronted. "These are...different. It ought to be something that can be touching you at all times. Like a watch, for instance," she finished, and held out her hand, indicating her watch, still smashed, strapped onto her wrist.

"You really ought to repair that," Ron pointed out, as the lacy glitter of the shattered glass, which almost completely obscured the face of the watch, threw sparkles from the firelight around the room.

"Call it a memento," Hermione said abruptly, swallowing hard. She didn't have to be able to see the watch's face to know what time it said. Less than two minutes before she lost Harry. She would fix it

when they'd found him again. "The portkey is activated by sound. You won't need to hold it, twist it, or manipulate it in any way. It simply needs to be touching you." Fred looked fascinated, and Hermione knew that this kind of innovation was right up his alley. She had told the boys about the idea, but they had not yet seen it in action. She smiled at her captive audience, unable to restrain a little glimmer of pride and self-satisfaction, and said, "Watch." She then sang, in a soft, slightly self-conscious voice,

"Twinkle, twinkle little star," and vanished. Mr. Weasley started visibly in his chair, and Remus muttered a mystified,

"What in the world?" under his breath. A moment later, Hermione emerged from the library, and strolled back into the War Room.

"How do you do that?" Tonks breathed in amazement.

"Portus exaudio." Hermione said. "Then you have to set the song. You can change it whenever you want. So if someone gets hold of your portkey, they can't make it work, unless they know the song. I was working on trying to make it activate just if you thought the song, in case you were Petrified or something, or key it to just one person's voice, so that it wouldn't work if anyone else sang the song, but I didn't have ... time..." she finished lamely.

"What you've done in this small amount of time is nothing short of incredible, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said.

"Do we have to sing 'Twinkle twinkle little star'?" Ron asked dubiously. Hermione looked at him sharply for a moment, before realizing that he was teasing her, and her face melted into a grateful smile.

"You can make the song anything you want, Ron," she said, softly, not in the mood to spar with him.

"We'll find him, Hermione," Ron said, more to make her feel better, than because he believed it, she was sure, but she appreciated the gesture all the same.

"I know. We should go. It'll be dawn soon, and it's better if we leave before there's light." The boys set their portkeys, and a little abashedly set the songs as well. Hermione felt a knot form in her throat, as Ron chose "Weasley Is Our King". She turned and busied herself with the strap of her bag, partly so they wouldn't see her fighting tears again, but also so she wouldn't have to see Mr. Weasley envelop both of his sons in a gigantic hug. I have to make sure they come back to him, she thought, feeling immeasurably guilty once again.

"Tell us where they are!" A masked Death Eater, looming impossibly large over the huddled form of Harry Potter, crumpled so in the corner of the stone room that he looked like a mere pile of tattered clothes.

"I'd rather die!" Harry shot back fiercely, all of the hatred and anger that he could not express in other ways forced into those three trembling words.

"That would be too merciful for the likes of you. The Dark Lord's got plans for you, you know. We'll be leaving soon." Blood dripped into Harry's eyes, as he succinctly and graphically told the Death Eater what the Dark Lord could do with his plans.

The subsequent Crucio made him pass out.

Hermione did not realize she'd made a noise, until she found everyone staring at her once again, as she stood with tear-filled eyes and one hand clapped over her mouth.

"Hermione?" Ron asked, in a tone of questioning concern, laying a hand lightly on her arm. Hermione moved her mouth up and down for a moment before any sound would come out.

"Oh...oh God – God, Ron...we've got to hurry," she said, in a weak, frightened voice that did not sound at all like Hermione. Ron didn't ask any questions, but merely nodded his head gravely, and turned to Fred, saying,

"Let's get out of here." As they mounted the steps to the joke shop, Ron looked at Hermione with undisguised worry.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked. She nodded, pushing her hair away from her face, even as her trembling hands betrayed her.

"They're hurting him," she said simply. "They're hurting him because they want to find us." He looked at her for a long moment, and seemed to find what he was searching for in her eyes.

"Merlin help the Death Eater that crosses paths with you," he said cryptically, after a moment. There was no time to ask what he meant, Hermione reflected with some frustration, as they crouched on the floor of the darkened shop, and determined exactly where they were going to go, along with their secondary destinations, if the first ones didn't pan out.

Wordlessly, the three of them moved, wraith-like, to the alley behind the shop, and Apparated away with hardly a sound.

Hermione looked down on the Riddle house from her vantage point on the hill, concealed from any watching eyes by a knotty, half-dead old tree, clinging desperately to the slope with clawed roots. The graveyard lay between her and Little Hangleton, with the Riddle House, large and foreboding, a short distance outside of the village. The moon was long since set, but dawn was just a gray promise on the horizon.

There were no lights visible from the Riddle house. She had her wand out carefully, walking slowly forward, a Disillusionment charm in place, and the ward detector clipped to her wand did not turn blue until she reached the edge of the graveyard, where Harry had been held fourth year.

So, this was it, then. Whether or not there was still anyone here, the wards were still up, in a circular fashion, she mused, probably with the house at the center. She sat down on the grass, calmly, in the shadow of a tombstone, and began to quietly work the magic that would enable her to slip past the wards. Her wand thrummed slightly with every ward she got around.

There were layers of them, and the time seemed to slip by so quickly that it was alarming. The grayness grew more prevalent, and

Hermione grew worried that she'd be seen, even though the dim uncertain light of dawn would probably still provide adequate cover, coupled with her Disillusion. This is taking too long! She thought frantically. There isn't enough time. What if they had moved him already? She didn't even know if she was in the right place.

Her hands were shaking, and the wand slipped in her sweat-slick grip, as she made it past another ward. She moved one leg, straightening it to stretch out the kinks, and her foot scuffed the side of the gravestone, making her jump.

And then something altogether unexpected happened.

A low rumble seemed to surge suddenly from the ground, ending as quickly as it had come, doing nothing more than gently vibrating the ground beneath Hermione. She froze, at first afraid that she had done something wrong and tripped some sort of alarm. But after that rumble passed, she noted two things. A light flickered on from one of the basement windows in the Riddle house, for such an infinitesimal length of time, that she thought she'd imagined it.

And someone screamed. It was cut off so quickly that Hermione stood to her feet in utter fear. But then she was left to wonder, if her fatigued, over-stressed, emotionally vulnerable mind had manufactured the whole thing.

Don't be absurd! Practical Hermione said snidely and superiorly. You wouldn't know a hallucination if it danced up to you wearing Dobby's tea cozy. A half-hysterical, wild smile wavered on her face, as she thought fondly of Ron's one-liners.

Harry was there. She hadn't thought Voldemort would do it, dismissed as some sort of would-be tactical mistake, but he was there. Voldemort had intended to finish it there, where he'd started the whole thing, by killing his parents as a mere teenager. Her heartbeat was deafening, and her hands shook nearly uncontrollably, as she tried desperately to turn her mind back to the task at hand. Her wand buzzed slightly in her hands. Another ward down. She moved forward again, but the detector was still blue. She sighed, and

realized that her wand had blurred before her, due to the tears stinging her eyes.

Dammit, Hermione! She thought angrily to herself. Pull yourself together! Again, thinking of Harry forced her to calm herself down. She was here to help him, and she had to focus on her task. She narrowed her eyes, glaring down at her wand as if it had personally offended her, and resumed her spell-casting.

The last two wards came down with almost astonishing ease, and she cautiously began to move forward again. As she wove her way carefully among the tombstones that gleamed in the dimness like crooked teeth, she saw the light flicker again, very briefly, from one of the windows.

Something was going on.

She began to move again, more rapidly this time. Perhaps the commotion at the Riddle house could work to her favor. Maybe they wouldn't be watching so closely. But she also was thinking of the bitten-off scream, and hoped that it didn't signify something even more ominous. They said they wouldn't kill him, she thought pleadingly. They said they wouldn't. She conveniently ignored the fact that she was clinging to what a Death Eater had said, while coercing a prisoner.

She had passed the small cottage at the base of the small hill, on which the Riddle house sat, overlooking the village. It was in almost as much disrepair as the big house, although ivy had only just begun to encroach upon its face. She looked around her suddenly in fright, her mind flying back to the day on the Hogwarts green. There was no cover here. The sun was beginning to rise. Even with the Disillusionment charm, someone looking right at her would be able to see her movement. She faltered visibly, hesitating, poised on the balls of her feet, looking back and forth from the Riddle house to the direction from whence she had come.

The light flickered again, quickly, as if someone was making an effort that it not be seen. Straining her ears at the nearly complete silence, she thought she could hear a clamor, noises of shouting and running.

Almost as an afterthought, Hermione decided against going for Ron or Fred. There was just no time.

She had nearly circled the house, careful to dodge quickly past the windows, which looked down upon her like leering, waiting, vacant eyes. In fact, she was nearly past it before she saw it, almost completely concealed behind an enormous overgrown bit of shrubbery.

A basement window, on the ground level, was broken, and she inwardly rejoiced at her good fortune. Her wand had been able to detect that the house was warded, but those wards would not extend to opened windows or doors, unless those same windows or doors were specifically sealed. She slid through it carefully, watching for dangerous protruding shards of glass, and landed lightly on her feet with scarcely a sound. A puff of dust billowed up around her, and she felt her throat spasm with the desire to cough, which she desperately quelled.

The basement room had obviously not had any human contact for years, and Hermione's eyes watered fiercely, as she tried to see in the near total darkness of the room. She stood in the quiet for a moment, and decided to risk a little light, with a whispered Lumos.

It looked to be merely some kind of storage room. Dilapidated cardboard boxes were stacked nearly to the ceiling, with great grey, fuzzy layers of dust and cobwebs coating them. There was a smell of mold in the air, and Hermione noted that part of the floor on which she stood was damp and a little mucky. She had made it to the door, and was about to exit, when she noted her footprints leading from the window, a screaming sign that an intruder was about.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" she whispered, lifting and disarranging the dust, so that her footprints vanished. She paused with her hand on the doorknob, her heart thundering rapidly in her chest. Did she dare open the door? There had been noises before – or at least she thought there had been – and now there was silence. She wasn't sure that she liked that any better, imagining all of the Death Eaters in the house, waiting in the corridor beyond for her to open the door.

“Fenestra,” she said, pointing her wand at the door. Immediately, a small square panel of the door shimmered into transparency. The dim, dingy hallway beyond was quite empty. With a relieved sigh, she cast *Silencio* on the door, to forestall any creaking, and slipped into the corridor.

She had traversed about half the length of the corridor, when she heard voices and footfalls approaching. She cursed to herself, and thought that, perhaps, she should have retrieved Fred and Ron after all. She tried the nearest door, and it sent an electric current of pain through her that sent her flying across the hall. She just barely managed to stop herself from colliding noisily with the wall opposite. Bloody hell! She thought vehemently, in a fairly faithful imitation of her best friend. She briefly toyed with and then discarded the idea of Apparating. She didn’t know if there were wards up, and she was not about to give up this ground she had so newly gained.

The voices were closer; at any moment, the footfalls would carry – two, she thought – people around the corner. She looked down at herself to make sure her *Disillusionment* charm was still active, and slid to the floor, pushing herself as far back in the shadows as she could. She folded her hands in her lap, and prepared to sit perfectly still.

This was easier said than done, when two Death Eaters came around the corner, their hoods and cloaks firmly in place. Every instinct in Hermione’s brain screamed at her to run, to hide, to get out of their way, to draw her wand! She forced herself to be absolutely motionless. The Death Eaters strode past her, the cloak of the one nearest her all but snapping her in the face. They stopped at the door that had rejected Hermione’s entrance, and keyed it open with their wands. As it opened to allow them inside, Hermione caught a glimpse of a stone floor and the dim glow of a green light from inside.

Her heart rose into her throat. That was the room! He was inside that room. Harry! She thought, with a kind of mental sob. She wasn’t sure how she could get in there, but she was sure she couldn’t just continue to sit out in the corridor and hope nobody saw her. Slowly, she rose to her feet, feeling grimy just from the few seconds on that dirty floor.

There was a door adjacent to the one that led to Harry, opening only centimeters away, as the two door frames were nearly touching each other. She used her Fenestra charm to determine that that room was empty, and quickly and quietly entered it.

The room was small, but in contrast to the storeroom by which she'd entered the house, it was quite clean. There was not a stick of furniture in it, but she noticed a narrow window running nearly the whole length of one wall. A thick crack ran jaggedly through that wall, passing through the window, and the glass therein was also cracked. She stepped closer toward the window, before processing that the window was set into the wall shared with Harry's cell.

Oh, sweet Merlin! Hermione thought, in a kind of dazed shock. He – he – he's afraid to face Harry, even wandless and in that dampening field, so he lets his Death Eaters torture Harry, while he watches. She peered anxiously through the window, observing that it appeared to be some kind of one-way glass. The entire cell was suffused in a green glow, which was emanating from the floor. Harry was sitting in the corner, no longer in the center of the ring. With this kind of exposure, Hermione thought, his magic had probably been so shot that he no longer needed to be within the ring for the dampening field to work.

Harry! She thought again, joyously, and jumped back from the window, startled, as Harry suddenly looked up toward her, and his eyes danced around the upper corners of the room in obvious confusion. Her frazzled mind took a second to process what had just happened. The Legilimency, she remembered. She took a deep breath, gathering her courage, and moved back into the window frame. The two Death Eaters had their backs to the window, and Harry was still looking toward it.

Harry, she thought tentatively, it's okay. I'm here now. Just hold on for me. The effort to perform Legilimency when she wasn't really used to it was great, and she left their communications at that for now, uncertain whether or not he'd even heard her. She turned her attention to the crack running along the wall, and wondered how that had happened. She bent down, pressing her ear to the crack, but

found that it had been sealed with a Silencio as well. What if the rumble caused the crack, and then I heard him screaming before a newly cast Silencio sealed it off? She wondered, and peered back out of the window again, almost instantly wishing she hadn't.

She wasn't sure what they were doing, but he was curled into the fetal position, his head tucked protectively down toward his knees, while they rained curses down on him. Suddenly he looked up, reaching one arm up toward the window, toward her, even while his mouth was moving in a soundless scream. She backed away from the window, unable to face it, to process what they were doing to him. She placed one hand on her chest, only to find that she was breathing very rapidly, and tried frantically to calm herself down. You won't help him like this, Hermione, and tried to feverishly think of what exactly she could do.

It was when she heard footfalls and the murmur of voices again that she realized that there was probably not much wisdom in lingering around a room from which Voldemort frequently watched torture. Dear God, if he comes in here... she thought, and the voices stopped right outside the door. She could hear the frantic, low whimpering of what sounded like a very frightened girl, the high tones sticking out plainly above the lower rumbling voices of the Death Eaters.

She moved into the shadows behind the door, hoping that if anyone came in, she would be at least partially concealed behind the open door.

But no one entered.

Instead, she heard Harry's door open and close, all noise once again melting into silence behind the wall of the charm. Against her better judgment and all too cognizant of the danger she was in, she rushed back to the window.

Voldemort was in the cell with Harry. Judging by the look on Harry's face, and the way the Death Eaters stood shoulder to shoulder in between them, this was the first time he had done so. Harry dragged himself to his feet, obviously in tremendous pain, barely able to stand upright. He spat some scathing comment at Voldemort that Hermione,

of course, could not hear, and was Crucio'd by a Death Eater for his pains.

Hermione had never been so proud of him.

But Voldemort had not yet played his trump card. From behind him, at such an angle that Hermione had not seen, he withdrew a girl. She was in dirty, torn Muggle clothing, and her hair cascaded, long and snarled, down her back. Her face was smudged with dirt and blood and stamped with terror, but it was quite clearly – herself.

Hermione stared at the tableau with unmitigated horror. She wondered wildly who this poor Polyjuiced soul actually was, and what they intended to do to her. She saw Harry's eyes flicker uncertainly from the window to the girl in front of him, and even more dread welled up in Hermione's soul.

He knew she was there. He had felt her presence, perhaps even heard her thoughts, and now he saw her, or so he thought, in front of him. Harry! She screamed desperately in her mind. That isn't me! That isn't me! He gave no sign that he'd heard her, and the weary expression of unbelieving despair on his face made her think that he had not.

Harry took an involuntary step toward the girl, his hand extended, and Hermione could see the dark bruising that shadowed his wrist and arm. Two fingers were curled in protectively, appearing to be broken. At his movement forward, Voldemort jerked the girl back by her hair, causing her to emit an involuntary frightened cry. The misery and mute apology on Harry's face made Hermione's already fragile heart crack into a thousand pieces.

Harry, please listen! She tried again, not even sure if she was even getting through. That's not me! It's a trick! That's not me!

Voldemort gave a perfunctory order, whipping his wand in the direction of the floor. Harry flung a longing glance at the faux-Hermione, and appeared to be on the verge of sinking to his knees on Voldemort's instruction. Hermione watched from the window, her

fingers clenched so tightly into the small sill that she was leaving marks in the wood.

Suddenly he stopped, leaning against the wall with one hand, looking for all the world like a stiff breeze would topple him over. Hermione noticed the dried blood crusted around his eyes and ears. His lip was a pulpy mess too, and she wondered if he'd been hit, or if he'd bitten through it in an effort not to cry out. His eyes were fixed on the girl, and Hermione saw his mouth move as he asked her what looked like a casual question.

The girl stared back at him, wide-eyed and uncomprehending, rendered all but completely incapacitated by paralyzing fear. Whatever Harry had asked had made Voldemort angry, for the resulting outburst made even the Death Eaters cringe in fear. The dark wizard yanked the girl's head back, forcing her to look upward to relieve the pressure on her hair, and – instead of just using Avada Kedavra – he used Diffindo on the pretty white column of her throat. Hermione gasped, both hands covering her mouth, as she struggled not to throw up.

Blood splattered all over the floor and onto Harry, whose legs just folded up underneath him, as he vomited weakly in the corner. Voldemort was laughing, as he pushed the body carelessly onto the floor, leaving it where it fell, as if it were a discarded article of clothing.

He threw another remark over his shoulder, as he and his entourage left, that had Harry scrabbling at the wall with bloodied fingers, trying in vain to stand again, driven nearly wild with anger. The door slammed loudly, causing Hermione to startle violently, as it was the only sound to carry through the silencing charm.

She stood stock-still, her eyes fixed on the door, but the clamor of feet, punctuated by laughter and jeers, passed by the room, and faded into more distant parts of the manor house.

Unsteady hands gripped the small windowsill once more, as Hermione, almost unwillingly, peered into the room again. She was treated to the unusual and singularly discomfiting scene of Harry, painstakingly crawling across the cell, gathering up the bloody corpse

of the girl he supposed was Hermione, and crying brokenly over her body.

TBC

Okay, there's another chapter. Now I know that last part was pretty dark, but I did rather enjoy writing it. I suppose I'm just that kind of sick person! It will be getting lighter (relatively speaking), because – of course! – the next chapter is the rescue! So stay with me folks, please!

I hope everyone is liking the story. I know it might not be everybody's cup of tea, but I'm hoping for more reviews. This story isn't much below average, with regard to reviews, compared with my other stories, but it sort of seems that it isn't generating as much interest. Maybe that's just me...

Anyway, I know it's dark now, but if you'll check out my other work, you'll find that I haven't written an unhappy ending yet! I'm not altogether sure that I could manage it, actually.

Cheers!

Lorien

Chapter Five: Recovery

Hermione watched the horrifying tableau, transfixed, her mind spinning as uselessly as traction-less tires in mud. She watched as Harry cradled the grotesque corpse of her doppelganger, her wild brown hair cascading over his arm. She watched him, her forehead knit with pain and her eyes shiny with tears, as he cried soundlessly, tears dripping down on to the dirty, torn blue sweater that the dead girl was wearing. So softly that it was almost a caress, he brushed some of her hair out of her still face, the pallor of which contrasted markedly with the grisly collar given her by Voldemort.

And then the body moved. Hermione stiffened, and Harry jumped initially, but then stopped, watching the occurrence with almost clinical detachment. The body was not moving under its own power; her skin was rippling, muscles moving underneath, in an effect that they had both seen before. Hermione saw the relief dawn upon his face.

In death, she was reverting back to natural form. Even bruised, with fright permanently impressed upon her features, it was obvious that she was young and attractive. Her hair was black and straight, eyes wide and almond-shaped, still blank with death, evenly set into a pale, pretty face. Harry looked at the unknown girl almost dispassionately for a moment before he threw up again.

Hermione sank to the ground beneath the window connecting the rooms, her back against the wall, thinking furiously. She could not get into the room through the door; she didn't have the time it would take to get through the wards, keyed as they had obviously been to certain wands. The Silencio charm would prevent any sound from leaving Harry's cell, but would not preclude her efforts to break through being heard and halted. Maybe she could cast her own as well, and ... her thoughts were all muddled. She wound her fingers around each other, twisting them together tightly, pleading with herself to remain focused. Please, Hermione, please. Don't think about...her. You can't afford to think about anything but getting Harry – and yourself – out alive.

Absent-mindedly, she ran a hand through her hair, which had tangled up quite impressively during her cloak-and-dagger act up to and into

the Riddle house. As they threaded down the back of her head, her fingers lightly grazed the wall behind her and skidded into a groove. Fine powdery silt slid up underneath her fingernails.

There was an expression on her face that Ron and Harry would have recognized, a look that usually just preceded a view of Hermione's flying curls and billowing robes as she suddenly hurtled toward the library. Slowly, she turned, looking at the gloomy gray expanse of the wall, marred by the presence of a single, crooked crack running diagonally through the one-way window, from ceiling to floor. Her eyes followed its tortuous path, her mind churning at a ferocious rate of speed.

With painstaking deliberation, Hermione stood up, and cast a Silencio charm, hoping somehow that the two adjacent – perhaps overlapping – silencing charms would work with each other, insuring that no untoward noise escaped when she did what she was planning. Without even looking at the door, she pointed her wand at it, and said,

“Colloportus.” The resulting squelch was soft, but Hermione flinched as if she'd slammed the door while sealing it. She remained absolutely silent for what seemed like an eternity, but there was no subsequent clamor, no clatter of feet or flinging of hexes. She wanted to add some more wards to the door, but was afraid that they would be detected somehow. She squatted down, on eye level with the portion of the crack beneath the window, and regarded it as solemnly as if it were a dueling opponent. She brushed a wayward strand of hair out of her eyes, and left a smear of dirt across her forehead. Almost reverently, she ran her finger down the deep crevice.

Then she took a deep breath, pointed her wand at the fissure, and for a brief instant, seemed to be steeling herself for what was to come – especially since she didn't know exactly what was going to happen.

“Engorgio!” she whispered fiercely, and, with a low rumble and sifting of dust, the crack widened. She bit her lips together, and rolled her eyes with terrified anxiety toward the door. Her wand trembled in her hand, as she kept it fixated on the widening crack, which yawned further. Dust rained down on the floor with a continuous hiss, and Hermione was frantically certain that an entire complement of Death

Eaters would be storming this room soon with Avada Kedavra in their eyes.

She lowered her wand, afraid of making the crack larger and bringing down the entire wall and ceiling with it. Even as she stepped toward the new opening she'd created, the ward detector on her wand turned blue. Damn! But it appeared to be just a light detection ward, one that would ascertain that Harry was where he was supposed to be perhaps, and she dismantled it easily.

Even sucking in her breath and sliding through the opening legs first beneath the window, it was still a tight fit. But then she was suddenly in the green-tinged cell, standing in front of a completely befuddled Harry Potter. She watched as his eyes grew wary, flickering from her to the dead body on the floor, and he struggled to stand again, backing away from her until he came in contact with the stone wall of the cell and could go no further. He was breathing heavily, as if he had just run a sprint. Her eyes watered as the pungent metallic combination of blood and vomit stung her nose.

She tucked her wand into her robes, and held up both hands, in her best "I'm not going to hurt you" manner.

"Harry," she said, struggling to keep her voice level and business-like. He's alive! Something inside her sang, he's alive and standing right in front of me, in this very room! "You've got to come with me. We – we don't have much time."

He surprised her by swearing violently. "So, who are you? Is this the game where he lets me think I've escaped?" He had spoken with great effort, but he arched his eyebrows at her coolly, and she was stunned at the depth and clarity of the hatred that flashed from his brilliant eyes, while the rest of him looked so beaten and near defeat. "Because we've done that one already."

Hermione shook her head spastically, a low trembling inarticulate sound all she could utter without breaking down completely. Dear God, what has he been through? It's only been four days, she thought, even though she knew too well what Voldemort and his minions were capable of. Mirrored loathing flooded Hermione's face

suddenly, tempered with compassion for him, and it must have been clearly readable in shine of her eyes, the flare of her nostrils, and the set of her lips, because he was looking at her with a little more attention now.

“Why don’t you ask me what you asked her?” she said evenly, while her inner voice was screaming at her, Hurry up for the love of all that is decent! The suspicion had not completely died from Harry’s eyes, but had been banked.

“I asked – I asked why you – why Hermione – came into our compartment on the train first year,” Harry said, in a raspy voice that had probably been driven hoarse from screaming. Somewhat closer to him now, Hermione noticed with her damned eye for detail that one of his eyes had burst blood vessels in it, turning part of the iris a lurid red. His glasses had been all but smashed, but were still perched crookedly and pathetically upon his nose. Part of her wanted to recoil from all of it – the physical evidence of such pointless cruelty repulsed her – but she was careful not to break eye contact with him.

“I was helping Neville look for Trevor,” she said clearly and without hesitation. “Ron was trying to cast that fake spell the twins taught him on Scabbers.” Sunshine, daisies, butter mellow... She pushed outwardly with her mind, inexpertly, not trying to communicate anything, but simply trying to get him to feel the essence that he knew, the very being that was Hermione.

The effect her words – and maybe the Legilimency as well – had on Harry was instantaneous, as his knees buckled beneath him, and she hurried to keep him from falling. Her arms were underneath his elbows, as she struggled to hold him up, and finally settled on helping him sit on the floor. She sat next to him, and noticed that his entire body was trembling.

He was touching her, softly, his filthy fingers running over the planes of her face, skimming into her hair. At one point, they lightly brushed through the wetness that was spilling out of her eyes. Hurry, hurry, hurry! Her pulse roared in her ears, even as her skin burned under his touch.

“Are you really you?” he asked plaintively, in the voice of a boy who’d been hurt so many times that he didn’t believe kindness could exist. “I felt you – I thought...maybe I was going mad – and then he brought her in, and – and I thought it really was you this time.” This time? Some detached part of her brain puzzled over the words.

“It’s me, Harry,” she said softly, her chin wobbling, as she stopped his hand with hers, and wound her fingers around his. “I promise. Can you stand up? Do you know where they put your wand?” He looked at her again then, his eyes bleak with bitterness and despair, and wordlessly pointed in the direction of the door.

Hermione turned, her heart in her mouth, uncertain of what he indicated, but figuring she was going to meet the business end of somebody’s wand. However, it was his wand he’d been pointing out to her, fastened just above the doorway with a sticking charm. She looked back toward Harry, and watched his jaw clench with broken pride.

Those horrible, heartless bastards! Hermione thought fiercely, and she once again was racked with sympathy and pain for what he’d been through, not only physical torture, but mental and emotional abuse as well. They had put him through prolonged exposure to that dampening field, knowing what it would do to him, and then left his wand in his sight as a jeering reminder of what he was not capable of.

“Solvare!” she said, loosing the sticking charm, and then Accio’d the wand. Her wand felt leaden and unwieldy, and the incantations seemed to stick in her mouth. Harry’s wand fell heavily, clattering across the room, lurching unevenly toward her. It did not fly into her hand, and she looked at it with bewilderment. She turned to regard Harry curiously and somewhat fearfully. He looked at her from under heavily lidded eyes. She picked up the wand and held it out to him, and he took it, turning it over and over in his hand, as if he weren’t quite sure what it was exactly.

“It’s the dampening field,” he answered her unspoken question haltingly. “It’s already affecting you. I – I don’t know why it doesn’t affect them. You need to get out of here.” She winced with the

knowledge of the kind of magic “they” had probably performed on him and in front of him.

“I’m not leaving you,” she said in her customary tone that brooked no argument. He looked lost and defeated and ashamed. He looked at his wand again.

“I can’t – ” he faltered. “I won’t be able to –” He tried to hand it back to her.

“I know, Harry,” she said hoarsely. “Just hold onto it, okay?” He neither acquiesced nor disagreed, and his eyes drifted listlessly over to the unknown girl lying in the pool of her own now congealing blood.

“She was the fourth one,” he said tonelessly, the distance in his voice contrasting with his prior grief.

Hermione had been in the process of squatting down beside him, attempting to throw his arm around her shoulders, so that she could bear most of his weight. She wasn’t sure she could manage it. I can’t levitate him through that crack, she was thinking desperately, but at Harry’s words, she stopped and looked at him, horrified.

“What?” she bleated, almost without comprehension.

“The fourth. She was... the fourth one he brought in here....probably a Muggle too... like – like the others.” She could see it clearly, still residing in his beaten, blood-encrusted face...guilt. He was already assigning the fault as his, that these girls were dead. He looked into her face, mere centimeters from his, as she tried to hoist him to his feet. “All you,” he said softly, and one tear freed itself from his stubborn eyes, wending its smudging way down his dirty face. “I’ve watched you ... die – four times, and he laughed. He – he knew that – that – ”

She took one step toward the crack, then another, trying to process what Harry had told her. She could hear the soles of his trainers scuffing loudly along the grimy floor, as he tried vainly to lift his feet and walk.

“What, Harry?” she said, trying to sound nonchalant. Another two staggering steps were made toward the crack. They were almost there; the cell was not very big.

“He knew that there was nothing worse that he could do to me,” Harry said suddenly, and his voice carried clearly into the tiny room. Hermione bowed her head, as she took another shuffling step toward the crack, the tears flowing unchecked down her face.

Her attention was suddenly arrested by her wand, which began to vibrate in her hand, the ward detector blinking on and off sporadically. Someone had erected a new ward down here, and there was no way that that was good. She redoubled her efforts to make it to the far wall, raggedly cleft by her spell.

“Hermione!” he cried out suddenly in a grunt of pain and protest. He was shaking violently again, and she wondered how many times they had used the Cruciatus curse on him, to make his muscles so weak and unresponsive, thoroughly fatigued from constantly clenching in pain. He was starting to fall again, and she could barely hold on to him.

“Harry, I’m sorry!” she said, and thick tears clogged her voice. “We can’t stop – we have to get out of –”

The door to Harry’s cell swung open.

Hermione blanched as Death Eaters spilled into the room, but she instinctively pushed Harry behind her, even as they disarmed her. There was a high-pitched malevolent cackle, and then she saw the magic-ravaged, soulless, red-eyed visage of Lord Voldemort framed in the doorway.

Harry was trying to get out from behind her, but he was so weak that the effort was a feeble one. Voldemort’s mouth split unpleasantly and his laughter echoed around the room. She fought the reflex to cringe.

“So, here we have the real Miss Granger, am I right?” he asked, as smoothly as if he were carrying on a polite conversation over tea.

"I am Hermione Granger," Hermione said, her voice ringing out clearly and decisively, lifting her chin and sweeping all of them with a challenging gaze. She felt Harry sag against her, and she struggled to stay upright, thrusting one hand behind her and intertwining her fingers with his.

"Take her jewelry," Voldemort snapped, and one Death Eater lunged forward, tearing her robes open and grasping roughly for the chain that gleamed at her neckline, ripping it from her. He also tore more of her shirt than would have been required, and Hermione tried to hold the pieces together with her other hand, while the other Death Eaters hooted derisively, making lewd comments. The loud scratchy sound of tearing fabric had fallen heavily in the cell. She felt the color rise in her face, wondering how Voldemort had known her medallion was magical, or if it had been a lucky guess. She had been hoping to use it, once they had gotten away from the possibly interfering effects of the dampening field, knowing that it had been specifically keyed to go through wards.

Voldemort held the medallion up in front of him, swinging it from the chain, as he examined it. He snapped his gaze up at Hermione, and must have seen the fearful, expectant expression on her face, for he threw the medallion to the stone floor and incinerated it into a puff of silvery ash with one quickly muttered spell. Hermione paled, and the Dark Lord sneered,

"Standing in front of him is only going to get you killed first, Miss Granger. And I will have had the distinct pleasure of watching you die more than once today," he said, with a mirthless grin. Harry made some kind of noise of protest behind her. The Death Eaters parted from in front of him, and he raised his wand. She looked down at the hand that rested on her chest, holding her tattered shirt together, and a glint of shattered crystal twinkled at her greenly in the sick glow.

"I'm not afraid of you," she said in a defiant voice, holding onto Harry's hand behind her as if her life depended on it. Merlin, please let this work! She smiled brilliantly at Voldemort, and sang, "Twinkle, twinkle little star."

The next thing Hermione was cognizant of was Harry's not outrageous, but not inconsiderable bulk slamming into hers and

knocking her into the ground. She landed with a noisy gasp, sliding along the ground, as all of the air was driven from her lungs. Her eyes watered fiercely as the top of her head cracked noisily against something, and for a moment she saw stars. Then she looked up, and saw that the structure with which her head had collided was, in fact, a Quidditch goal post. It wavered and shimmered in her watery vision, as she tried to blink the tears from her eyes. Her ears were ringing.

She sighed heavily with relief, and something like elation caused her heart to skip a beat. It worked, oh, it worked! Even through the wards and everything! She had not been at all sure that it would, and so she had been trying to get out of that cell to use the medallion. Her chest rose and fell rapidly as she tried frantically to get oxygen into her compressed lungs, when she realized that Harry was still lying half on top of her.

He wasn't moving.

"Harry?" she whispered, her voice sounding high and quavering in the empty field. She tried to slide out from under him, without jostling him too much. She had no idea what other injuries he had sustained. She felt the tension in her body ratchet up to nearly unbearable levels until she was able to make out the rapid, shallow breathing that panted through his parted lips. Her hands patted at his shoulder, his cheeks; she ran her fingers into his hair, her palms at his temples, and said, a little more loudly, "Harry?" It was then that she noticed that blood was smeared on her torn shirt, and she could see that some of his crusted wounds had broken back open on impact. Her mind was racing at its customary frenetic pace once again.

She looked around the Quidditch pitch. It felt like days had passed in the Riddle house, but the sun was only just now fully over the horizon. From her seated position, the grass, allowed to run wild, was nearly shoulder high and still damp with dew. The only movement she could see was that of a handful of butterflies lurching about in their drunken flight pattern. The only sound was the wind in the trees beyond the field, and an occasional trill of birdsong. The house was out of sight beyond the trees. She took a deep breath and felt some satisfaction

temper her fear. She had chosen well for her portkey, resetting it just before they had departed: the Quidditch field behind the Burrow was an excellent place, unused for some time, isolated, with neither wizards nor Muggles around.

She felt strangely sapped, and couldn't figure out why at first, but then she suddenly remembered the dampening field. It's already affecting you, Harry had said. She had not wanted to Apparate back to the alley behind the joke shop in broad daylight, staggering under the weight of a very injured Harry Potter anyway, but this decided that conundrum. She could only hope that her magic aptitude would return either before or with nightfall, and that she could do something to ease Harry's pain.

My bag! She thought suddenly, looking frantically for it. The strap had torn, and it had landed a short distance away. She only hoped that everything in there of use was still intact. As it was, she wouldn't be able to do much for Harry without her wand. If only I could have gotten it back. She looked at Harry's wand, which had rolled a little ways away from his now relaxed hand, and wondered if she could make it work, remembering Ron's often poor results with Charlie's old wand. It was better than nothing at all, she decided, and retrieved both her bag and his wand.

The potions were unbroken, and she pulled them out eagerly, examining the labels to determine which would best suit Harry's needs. Gently, she pulled his glasses from his face, noting that the wire frames had been bent out of and then back into shape and one lens was missing. She thought about testing out Harry's wand and repairing his glasses, but figured that she'd better not risk any magic until the effects of the dampening field wore off. She shook her head as she remembered the uneven, jerky response of Harry's wand to her Accio, and uncorked the potion she'd selected.

She let a few drops of the viscous liquid drip into Harry's mouth, and eyed his wounds critically. Blood and dirt were crusted everywhere, and it looked almost impossible that he'd only been in captivity for four days. Her mind went instantly to the small pond behind the Weasley's home, and she looked down at Harry speculatively. Can I leave him alone long enough to go for water?

She grabbed his wand and headed for the pond, the roll of bandages clenched in her hand. She paused a few paces away to affirm that the tall grass of the pitch did conceal Harry from sight, and then she broke into a run.

She soaked the roll of bandages in the water as thoroughly as she could, her dentist's daughter's mind trying not to think of all the microorganisms roiling unseen in the liquid. She had barely reached the edge of the pitch, when she heard a muffled, inarticulate cry near the goalpost. She ran for the spot where she'd left him, skidding to a halt at his side. He issued a strangled groan that could have been her name.

"Harry? Harry? I'm right here." His eyes snapped open suddenly and fixed on her, and a shaky hand reached for hers.

"You – you – we got away?" he mumbled. She let a small smile curl her mouth, and whispered,

"We got away." She turned her attention to the drenched roll of bandages. It took two attempts at a Purgo with Harry's wand to – hopefully – disinfect the water. She squeezed the loose tail of the bandage, letting some of the water fall into his mouth, and he swallowed it gratefully. She then set about to cleaning some of his more livid looking wounds.

"What...now?" he asked, hissing air through his teeth at her ministrations.

"We try to get back to the Shop," she said, matter of factly, not looking at him. She unbuttoned his shirt, and looked critically at his chest, which was black and blue with horrible bruises. As she passed her hand lightly across it, he groaned, and she jumped. "I think you've some broken ribs."

He mumbled something about Malfoy's boots, as he grimaced, and she uncorked a vial of thick salve, shaking it into her hand like one would shake a catsup bottle, struggling to conceal the emotion his words elicited. She began to dab at his injuries carefully with the

salve, and when she was done, let him have more of the pain-killing potion. She smeared his open wounds with a sealing serum, and they both had some of the water. She then carefully washed his face and hands with the remainder of the wet bandages.

She regarded him carefully then. His hair was lank and dirty, and his face was still dark and misshapen from bruises, and his eyes were swollen, with a hemorrhage in one, but he – he was still Harry, her Harry, and she had missed him so much. The Polyjuiced Muggle version of him just wasn't the same.

"Glad you came," he said with effort, coughing at the end of his sentence. "Shouldn't have...dangerous."

"How could I not?" she answered, with her heart in her eyes, helpless to prevent it from being so. His discerning eyes searched her face carefully, and he took a shuddering breath.

"Where's... Ron?" The odd timing of the question made her jump guiltily.

"I don't know, Harry," she said, opting for candor. "We were looking for you, and that medallion was my link to them, and now that it's been destroyed... I'm hoping we can Apparate back once it gets dark. I could reset the portkey, but without my own wand, I don't know where we'd –" She stopped her absent-minded rambling when she saw that Harry had slipped back into unconsciousness. His breathing was fast and shallow.

She looked down suddenly, realizing that her shirt was still torn and had been the entire time she and Harry had been talking. Flushing uncomfortably, even as she felt silly for worrying over such things at a time like this, she pulled a spare shirt from the bottom of the bag, and changed quickly, discarded the fragments of her other blouse.

She slouched down into a more comfortable seated position next to him, twining his hand in both of hers, and pulling all three arms under her chin, his hand close to her heart. Now there was nothing to do but wait.

With all the stress and worry and relief and adrenaline that had alternately flooded her system for the last few days, it was nearly unfathomable to Hermione that she could have nodded off – sitting up! – next to Harry. As it was a distant noise like many fireworks detonating jolted her from a sound sleep. She blinked her eyes in disorientation, looking at the tall grass that surrounded her, trying to remember exactly where she was and what had happened. Harry moved restlessly next to her, and the memories rushed back.

And that meant that the noises like firecrackers were....

“Oh,” Hermione breathed in a barely audible gasp. “Oh, oh, ohoh shit!” she said, looking frantically around. How in the hell had they traced a bloody Portkey? I shouldn’t have stayed here! I shouldn’t have stayed here! She berated herself, knowing that even though it had taken them hours – the sun was now well past its zenith – that Voldemort’s followers had, in fact, pursued them somehow.

She could hear distant shouts, as well as tumult arising from the neighbors. Stay inside your houses, please! Hermione thought fervently. The clamor came nearer, as the Death Eaters converged on the house. The breeze carried the sounds clearly, even though she could not see the Burrow.

“Anti-apparation wards!” came one order, and Hermione watched the sky fearfully, waiting for the telltale shimmer. Was she far enough out of range? She looked doubtfully at Harry’s wand. Should she risk Apparating Harry, and possibly splinching both of them? Or should she reset the portkey with her own off-kilter magical abilities and someone else’s wand?

“We could end up anywhere!” she muttered to herself, feeling her forehead break out in a cold sweat. Her eyes flitted down to Harry. “I guess anywhere is better than here.” There was a rushing noise and Hermione could just see flames beyond the trees. The Burrow burned.

“Portus exaudio,” she incanted, tapping her watch with Harry’s wand. The timepiece did not glow. She repeated the spell, a little more desperation fraying the edges of her voice. “Damn it!” she swore, even as she remembered with frustration that it didn’t matter anyway.

She could not Portkey and risk leading the Death Eaters to the Shop. If they had traced it once, they could perhaps trace it again. She heard voices nearer, and risked peeking out from the tall grasses of the pitch.

Two Death Eaters stood at the edge of the trees that ran between the field and the Burrow. Their speech carried to her clearly.

“... wants the boy back. But he said...what we like with the girl ... provided ... make Potter watch.” One of them leered at and nudged the other, and Hermione felt her gorge rise. Her trembling hands betrayed her state of mind, as she looked down at the recalcitrant wand.

Can I concentrate enough to Apparate? Think of the alley behind the joke shop. She closed her eyes and scrunched up her forehead in effort, but her thoughts were so frazzled that she figured they'd be splinched for sure, perhaps irreversibly.

“I've got to do this!” she said in a low whisper, taking a deep breath, and forcing herself to slow down, to calm down. Her heart was still leaping about inside her chest like a frightened rabbit. The Death Eaters had begun a slow survey of the pitch, though the casual way in which they looked suggested that they didn't think their search here would be fruitful. “Harry?” she leaned down, her voice barely audible. He groaned in response, and she shushed him frantically. “You've got to sit up for me. We've got to Apparate now. It's not going to feel good.” He rolled glassy eyes toward her, and she looked desperately for cognizance.

“Kay,” he grunted softly, wincing, but struggling not to cry out, as Hermione sat him up, throwing her bag on her shoulder. She wrapped the other arm firmly around his, and closed her eyes. Think of the three D's, she could still hear that instructor's flat voice intoning.

There was a loud crack, and, in the infinitesimal moment before Disapparation, she could hear the shouts of the Death Eaters. Their materialization was nearly as rough as their Portkey landing. Hermione's feet came out from under her as she fell, colliding with a hard, lumpy surface, and trying to shield Harry from the worst of the

impact. She could have cried when her hands scraped hard against the abrasive gravel of the alley behind Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes, but it wouldn't have been from the pain.

"Oh, thank Merlin!" she heard herself mutter brokenly, and then she paused to wonder why there seemed to be so many limbs tangled up with hers.

"Hermione?" came an incredulous voice that she instantly recognized.

"Ron?" Hermione's voice mirrored the confusion in his. "What happened?"

"You bloody well Apparated right on top of me, that's what happened," Ron said in a low, disgruntled voice that did nothing to disguise how glad he was to see her. "We've been looking for you for hours."

"He destroyed my medallion," Hermione said, trying to right herself, while keeping one arm cradled under Harry.

"Who destroyed – " Ron broke off and changed tack, when he noticed the extra body piled up with himself and Hermione. "Bloody hell, Hermione. You've done it. How is he?" Hermione shot him an exasperated look.

"He's been in Voldemort's tender loving care for four days," she hissed. "How do you think he is? Let's get him inside. Be careful with him," she added anxiously, as Ron levitated Harry up and opened the back door.

Inside the joke shop, she felt naked and exposed, as they bent low to dodge the windows looking out onto Diagon Alley, the bustling of which seemed somehow ominous to her. Ron, she noticed, was careful to keep Harry's height off the ground below window level. She held the lab door open for them, and breathed a little easier once they were all inside.

"You're going to have to get the door," she said with chagrin. "Voldemort took my wand." A thread of annoyance laced her tone.

Ron lowered Harry gently to the floor and used his wand to open the hidden door. Hermione watched Harry anxiously.

“You got away from Voldemort without a wand?” Ron looked at her with wide eyes.

“Well, I had Harry’s wand, but it hasn’t worked for me very well,” she admitted, as Ron levitated Harry again, and they proceeded carefully down the stairs. She thought she heard her redheaded best friend snort sarcastically,

“Hasn’t worked for you very well!” He sounded torn between admiration and disgust. She would have laughed if the situation hadn’t seemed so dire. Harry had lost consciousness again, and what effect would their flights and rough landings have on him? She wondered how long it would take his magic to recover – if it even would – and she wondered how he would cope with it in the intervening time. She thought of the dead girl, and how quickly and meaninglessly death had snatched her away, and a shudder ran through her slender frame.

They came around the corner to the wide, open doorway of the War Room, where the other Order members, save Mr. Weasley, were hunched around the wireless again.

“Bloody hell,” Fred said succinctly, his jaw going a little slack. The other Order members looked as if they would gladly echo Fred’s sentiment. Ron was floating Harry down the hall, and stopped before the door to Ginny’s room, which Hermione could not logically fault, as it was an infirmary of sorts, as well as the only room to have actual beds, rather than bunks.

Mr. Weasley was slumped in a wing chair next to Ginny’s bed, and did a double take of astonishment, as Ron set Harry gently down on the other bed, and the rest of the Order clustered around the doorway, watching with wide eyes.

Professor McGonagall made her way forward, and began to examine Harry, as Hermione stood at Harry’s head, her eyes following the Headmistress’ every move.

“You’ve done a good job with the field medicine, Miss Granger,” she finally announced, as she began to use the healing charms that Hermione had not trusted herself to perform. She looked down at Harry, relaxing slightly as his breathing seemed to ease.

After a moment, Professor McGonagall seemed to be satisfied, remarking only that it was amazing that his injuries were so superficial. Hermione was on the verge of protesting, knowing that there were wounds that were not so easily found and that did not so easily heal. She stopped, after another look at Harry, and suggested that they go into the War Room, so she could tell them what exactly had transpired.

Remus and Mr. Weasley had remained behind, to get Harry into clean clothing, and Hermione began her story once they’d arrived.

“I don’t know what you did, Hermione, but I must say it was brilliant work all the way round,” Remus said, sinking into a chair, and shaking his head. The others agreed, while Ron shot Hermione a rather appraising look.

“Think of how well it would have come off if she’d gotten help like she was supposed to,” he remarked pointedly, and Hermione flushed. She had hoped that he wouldn’t have picked up on that right away.

“Ron, by the time I realized that I could use back-up, I was already in the house. I wasn’t going to risk leaving, and not being able to get back to him.”

“You said Voldemort destroyed your medallion! You could have been killed,” Ron said hotly.

“I could have been killed falling down the stairs!” Hermione retorted, and Ron flushed.

“Does it not even bother you that we’ve been back here since this morning, all of us, worried sick about where you were?”

“Ron – ” Remus tried to interject, but Hermione overrode him.

"Voldemort got my wand, Ron! There was a dampening field in Harry's cell, and it threw my magic off. I was afraid to try anything with Harry's wand and end up doing Merlin knows what! I was going to wait until nightfall to Apparate back. If the Death Eaters hadn't – " she stumbled abruptly to a stop, looking profoundly guilty. Ron had grown very still.

"If the Death Eaters hadn't what?" he asked.

"My portkey was set for the Quidditch pitch behind your house," she sighed. "They traced it." Ron had paled, and Hermione hastened to add, "But I didn't use it to get back here. I Apparated. We should be okay."

"Home?" he asked in a voice that cracked halfway through the lone syllable, and Hermione realized that she had misunderstood his panic. Her eyes filled up with tears.

"They've burned it." She whispered. She looked toward Fred and Mr. Weasley, as if for some kind of absolution. "Ron, I'm – " she reached out for him, but he recoiled away from her so violently that he upended his chair, pacing around the entrance to the War Room agitatedly, like a big cat in a cage.

"Hermione, there was no way you could've expected them to trace the Portkey. I didn't even know it could be done," Mr. Weasley said in a sympathetic, but still rather vacant voice.

"She could have gone for help, like we agreed on!" Ron said angrily. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad he's safe. But you – you could've been killed, Hermione. Don't you remember anything I've said to you this week?" Hermione remembered. I don't think I could take it if something happened to you.

"But Harry – " she managed, before her throat closed up completely.

"Harry!" Ron sounded incensed, but there was a tinge of something else in his voice. "Harry? It's always about Harry with you!"

“Ron!” Tonks reprimanded sharply.

“That’s quite enough, Ron,” his father said tiredly. Ron swore and knocked his overturned chair across the room, where it hit a wall, before striding out of sight. There were a few beats of tense silence, before they heard a door slam.

“I’m – I’m sorry,” Hermione said to the rest of the group, feeling ashamed that after their talk about her not unnecessarily risking herself, how she was not expendable, that she had gone off on her own after all. “If you’d been there, if you’d seen ... h – him, you – you’d – ”

“I trust that you did what you thought was best, Hermione,” Mr. Weasley said gently. “Ron’s ... been through a lot, I – lost a lot. He doesn’t want lose you too.” Hermione’s throat was burning, and her eyes stung. With all they’d been through in the last few days, it was a wonder that someone hadn’t already gone completely to pieces.

“I know,” she croaked.

“What you’ve done for the Order,” Tonks spoke up, looking at her with gentle eyes, “is – is incredible. To have Harry back would be wonderful anyway, but given his power and how his presence would boost morale...plus with the Prophecy – ” he stopped. Hermione was shaking her head, and a tear dripped forlornly down her cheek.

“No power,” she managed to say, still having trouble forcing words through the clog in her throat.

“The dampening field?” Fred asked, understanding her meaning first. She nodded.

“It was keyed specifically to him. They had – had his wand fastened above his cell door, on the inside. So he could – so he would be able to see it, knowing that he couldn’t fight back.”

“Perhaps you’d better tell us everything now,” McGonagall prompted gently, and Hermione poured out the whole sordid tale, complete with the Muggle’s grisly death and Harry’s limited commentary about what

he'd been through for the last four days, leaving out only his remark, He knew that there was nothing worse that he could do to me. It was too personal, too revealing, and she would not, could not speak it there in front of her boyfriend's father and brother.

"If he was planning to execute Harry publicly, then this is going to be a huge blow to his pride. Voldemort will stop at nothing to recapture him," Remus was saying gravely.

"Did Harry say anything about the security of the Shop?" Tonks asked, intently, leaning forward across the table toward Hermione.

"No," Hermione said. "He was kind of out of it. But if – if the Shop was compromised, wouldn't – wouldn't Voldemort have come already?"

"Probably," Tonks was in Auror mode, steepling her fingers under her chin and obviously thinking furiously. "But he knows you're alive now, whereas before he was only guessing. Couple that with your appearance in Knockturn Alley yesterday, and – and –"

"And the Weasleys' known affiliation with this shop –" Fred interjected. They all looked seriously at each other.

"They're going to come," Remus finished for them, with no doubt or uncertainty in his voice. Hermione felt a tremor run over her body. Standing in front of him is only going to get you killed first rang through her head, followed by Ron's accusation: It's always about Harry with you!

"We should start packing everything up," Tonks said. "Maybe we can be moved out of here by tomorrow."

"Should Harry be moved?" Hermione blurted suddenly, and then felt foolish. Tonks was looking at her with a glimmer of understanding in her eyes.

"You've moved him twice already," she teased. "I think he'll be fine. Why don't you get some rest? You certainly deserve it." The Auror laid a gentle hand on Hermione's shoulder. "I should tell you, we have guests resting back there."

“Who?” Hermione’s one-word question was a breathless gasp.

“Luna..and Neville,” Tonks answered. “Augusta and Luna’s dad – didn’t make it. They had joined forces evidently, concealed the children. Death Eaters killed them, but were unable to find Neville or Luna.” Hermione’s hand had gone up to her mouth during Tonks’ statement.

“What about Fleur? Percy?” she wondered aloud, but Tonks only shook her head sadly.

“We haven’t been able to find them. Madame Pomfrey either...Flitwick...”

“Hagrid?” Hermione suggested.

“Still no word since he traveled to the continent. It may be months before we hear from him, with communications the way they are. He probably doesn’t even know what’s happened...if he’s even still alive,” Tonks added tiredly, shaking her head at the bad news that seemed upwelling and everlasting. “Now go. Sleep.”

“Okay,” Hermione said distantly, and stood, though she really didn’t want to go back to her bunk, in the room where Ron was. Moving sluggishly, as if the stress of the day had finally caught up with her, she drifted down the hallway in a fog, and was surprised when she opened the door to find herself faced with the two convalescents. She hadn’t really meant to come to this room. Still, her feet carried her to Harry’s bedside, as if propelled by some other power. She knelt by the bed, and leaned her elbows on the mattress. His dark hair was shiny in the low light of the room, and she figured that Lupin or Mr. Weasley had cast a cleaning charm on his hair. He already looked much better.

“Hi, Harry,” she whispered softly. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you how glad I am that you’re back and that you’re okay. I wanted you to know that I – ” He stirred restlessly, and mumbled a slurred,

"H'mione?" With great effort, he turned his head to look at her fully. Hermione knew that her face had to be wreathed in a radiant, foolish smile. He slid one arm across the bed, palm up, revealing fingers that had been splinted while the bones knit. She gladly placed her hand in his. "Sreally you?"

"It's really me," she affirmed. "You're at the Shop. Everything's going to be okay now." She wondered if she really meant it, but he seemed to see through her statement of optimism.

"How bad?" he asked, and she deliberately misunderstood him.

"Your injuries aren't severe," she replied. "Professor McGonagall reckons you'll be fine." He shook his head painstakingly.

"The war...how bad?" He was speaking through clenched teeth, and Hermione could tell he was trying to conserve his strength by keeping his statements clipped and short. Oh, that, she thought glumly. Of course he'd want to know. She met his eyes dead on, and felt his fingers tighten briefly around hers.

"It's bad, Harry," she said sincerely.

"Ginny?" he rolled his eyes toward the occupant of the other bed, and Hermione felt her heart squeeze involuntarily in pain, as Practical Hermione began berating the idea of jealous behavior at a time like this.

"She got the partial effects of a curse. We don't know what did it, or how to fix it. She's stable for now," Hermione informed him. He was still looking at Ginny.

"Hospital?"

"The Death Eaters have got it," she said flatly. Harry appeared to ponder this for awhile, and stayed silent so long that Hermione thought he might have drifted off to sleep again, but at length, his eyelashes fluttered and his gaze returned to hers.

“Who...else?” Hermione pursed her lips together, knowing exactly what he meant. “Harry...” she began, her voice gentle. Harry regarded her warily, as one would when he knows the news is not going to be good. She quickly gave him a list of the Order members present in the Shop, remembering to gratefully add Luna and Neville’s names to the list, and watched in alarm as his eyes filled with tears.

“That’s it?” he rasped disbelievingly, as the tears fell weakly down his temples and into his hair. “Mrs... Weasley?”

“I’m sorry, Harry,” Hermione said, clamping her mouth shut as her jaw began to tremble. She was not going to cry in front of him, not when he needed her to be strong.

“Where’s Ron?” he ventured, after a long moment of silence.

“Do you want me to get him for you?” she asked stiffly, still trying to quell her rising emotion.

“You two fight again?” he queried, slanting a look of concern at her. She was so startled that she withdrew her hand from his, folding it with its mate into her lap. A weak grin glimmered on his face.

“How did you know that?” she asked, half-smiling, a little unwillingly.

“Always know... I know you. Can always tell,” he mumbled, shifting a little in the bed, and grimacing. Her eyebrows knit together in worry.

“I should go,” she said, though she didn’t really want to. She was halfway out of her kneeling position, when the door opened. Harry reached for her with surprising quickness, snagging her wrist with loose fingers.

“No. Stay,” he entreated, and Hermione looked up to see Ron standing in the doorway. My face must be all over guilt, she thought, annoyed at herself. Ron’s face was unreadable.

“Figured I’d find you here,” he said blandly, causing Hermione to shoot a look at him. His features gave nothing away, and this

nonplussed Hermione, as Ron generally wore his feelings on his sleeve.

“Ron!” Harry breathed, his eyes alighting as Ron approached the bedside. Ron’s face relaxed, as he took in Harry’s presence.

“It is good to see you again, mate. Didn’t think we would,” he said candidly. Hermione felt a wave of relief course through her, as Ron sat in the chair that his father had occupied, located in between the two beds. At least he’s not going to fight with me now, in front of Harry. She sank back to her knees beside Harry’s bed.

“Didn’t think so...either,” Harry managed. His mouth was turned up in a slight smile, but his eyes were glazed and far away. Hermione wondered how long he would see scenes from the Riddle house in his nightmares.

“I reckon Hermione told you about – about – ” Ron struggled to finish, but gave up as Harry nodded.

“She told me,” he said quietly. “M sorry. If I –”

“It’s not your fault, Harry,” Ron spoke heavily. “Nobody here thinks so. We’re just glad you’re back.”

“No good now,” Harry struggled to say, sounding angry. “Can’t fight... bloody Squib.” he suddenly seemed to be breathing faster, and Hermione pressed the back of her hand to his forehead in concern.

“What’s he on about?” Ron asked, his eyes going curiously to Hermione. Her anxious eyes flickered to Harry uncertainly, and she tried to subtly shake her head at Ron.

“Don’t talk about me... like I’m not here!” Harry barked suddenly in a full sentence, and he pushed himself up on his elbows.

“Sorry, mate,” Ron said quietly, while Hermione added,

“Harry, lie down, please.” He looked as if he wanted to protest, but lay back down, and Hermione could see from his weakly trembling

muscles how much even that small effort had fatigued him. He regarded them silently, his tired eyes belying the mutinous set of his jaw. Hermione stood up, stretching the kinks out of her knees.

“Come on, Ron,” she said quietly, suddenly feeling as tired as Harry looked. “We’ll come back later.” Ron held the door open for her, guiding her out with the lightest of touches on her back. She looked over her shoulder at the door, and was startled to see Harry watching them leave, a thoughtful look of regret and longing on his face.

TBC

Ugh. This chapter is still on my last nerve. The rescue came easily enough, but the parts after that were harder. I keep thinking that they aren’t grieving properly, but then, they can’t...they don’t have time. I hope it’s not coming across as all of them treating the deaths lightly.

I hope you’re enjoying the story so far. Next chapter: The Order goes a’raidin’, and Hermione comes unglued.

Chapter Six: Raid

Someone was shaking her shoulder softly. Hermione opened bleary eyes, and then shut them tightly against the bright light streaming in through the open door from the corridor. Ron's concerned face was almost at her eye level, where she slept on the top bunk above him. She blinked at him in confusion, her eyes struggling to adjust, and then she suddenly thought Harry! and sat up quickly.

"What's wrong?" she asked in an urgent whisper. Fred shifted restlessly in his bunk across the room.

"It's time to go," was Ron's simple reply. "Are you finished packing?" Hermione nodded. She had completed what little packing there was to be done in a stony silence last night, while she and Ron had tried to ignore each other completely.

"I finished last night. What time is it? Why are we leaving now?"

"It's a little after two," Ron answered. "They want to go ahead and leave while it's dark, since we'll have to Apparate out of the back alley."

"Is the house ready?" Hermione asked, referring to the one Tonks had mentioned in Cornwall. Ron nodded, his silhouette backlit against the light in the hall.

"They warded it yesterday while – " he stopped, clearly seeing that as a still sore subject between them. " – after they found Neville and Luna," he amended. "Remus is the Secret Keeper. I reckon he'll give us coordinates or something, so we know where to Apparate."

"Do I have time for a shower?" she asked, climbing down from the bunk, and flinching a little as her bare feet touched the cold floor. He nodded briefly, but didn't meet her eyes. She gave him an annoyed look, remaining within his field of vision until he finally flicked his eyes toward her, in a look of commingled frustration and resignation.

"Hermione – " he sighed, sounding annoyed and sad. She pursed her lips together tightly, and held up one hand for him to stop.

“Don’t worry about it, Ron. I guess I’d better hurry.” She went to the trunk in the corner of the room, and gathered some toiletries and articles of clothing, crushing them together in her arms carelessly. She swished out of the door airily, letting it close decisively behind her without quite slamming. She paused on the other side of the door, her body arched toward it, listening intently. She heard the mattress rustle slightly as Ron sat back down on his bunk. He heaved a gusty sigh. Hermione could imagine his stance, hunched forward, elbows on knees, head in hands. A moment later, there were footsteps, shuffling, the murmur of voices. He’d awakened Fred.

Dammit, Ron! She thought with irritation. What’s wrong with us? Why can’t you be happy that I saved Harry? Does it matter how I did it? Why can’t you talk to me? Even as she wondered, she knew the answer. Ron knew the answer. He had said it himself. It’s always about Harry with you! Harry was their best mate, their salvation, their bridge to each other, and the barrier that kept them apart. She felt the beginnings of a headache stirring in her temples, and gathered her shower things more securely under her arm. I don’t have time to think about this right now, she told herself authoritatively, and hurried into the loo.

She took a hurried shower, her eyes generally fixed unseeingly toward the corner of the stall, as she mechanically lathered her hair and body. She hastily towed her hair off, and threw it up into a sloppy topknot, slightly annoyed that she had not thought to bring Harry’s wand with her. Who even had it now anyway? Surely it would at least perform a drying charm on her hair! She dressed quickly, wadding up her towels, and ran to replace them in her trunk and shrink everything down for travel. As she sprinted down the hallway, she could hear murmurs and bustlings in the War Room, and her eyes drifted unwittingly to Harry’s door.

How was he going to travel? How was he even doing this morning? She felt instantly guilty. She should have gone to check on him. Instead she had gotten all ruffled and out of sorts thinking about her problems with Ron. There are more important things to be worrying over... she began, and heard Ron’s angry voice assert once again: It’s always about Harry with you! She shook her head a little, as she

proceeded into the room, and repacked her things into her trunk. Ron and Fred had already removed their things from the room, and were nowhere to be seen. She reached toward her pocket for her wand, remembering an instant too late that it was gone. Someone was going to have to shrink her damn trunk for her.

"Need some help?" came a voice, and she turned to see Arthur Weasley poking his head hesitantly around the open door. She shrugged self-deprecatingly and nodded a little.

"I don't – "

"Have your wand," he finished for her. "A bit of bad luck, that," he agreed. With a wave of his wand and a muttered spell, her trunk had been reduced to the size of a pencil case. She smiled gratefully and tucked it into the knapsack that she had used on her mission yesterday. As she picked it up, she remembered that the strap was broken, and looked askance at the tear. Mr. Weasley cast a Reparo on it, without her even having to ask.

"Thank you, Mr. Weasley," she murmured softly, feeling somehow undone by even this simple act of kindness.

"Think nothing of it, Hermione," he answered in kind. "I – I've been meaning to ask you...that is, I wondered how you're holding up?" He rubbed the back of his head somewhat ruefully, looking at his shoes. Hermione could see where Ron had gotten his reluctance to talk about all things emotional.

"How'm I holding up?" she repeated, looking a little stunned at his question. She swallowed hard. This is the man who has lost three sons and his wife in one day – not to mention countless friends and colleagues at the Ministry, less than a week ago! And he wants to know how I'm doing?

"I'm sorry," he apologized quickly, stammering a little. "I've overstepped. I – I shouldn't have asked you, but – "

"No, no, Mr. Weasley," Hermione hastened to reassure him. "I – it's just that – I should be asking you that question."

“Oh, yes, well...” he stuck his hands into the pockets of his rumpled slacks. Hermione wondered if he’d perhaps slept in the chair by Ginny’s bed. He pressed his lips together tightly, and his eyes became shiny with tears. “Molly – Molly and I – we – we knew... when we signed up with the Order, what it might – not that it makes it easier, but it – it – we knew the possibilities... The boys though... now – my boys, that’s something I can’t – I – and Percy – we don’t even know where – if – ” he was rambling, and Hermione got the distinct impression that he’d even forgotten she was there. His eyes snapped up to her suddenly, and he looked a little embarrassed. “But that’s enough about me. I came to ask about you. I know Ron – Ron said some things last night... I don’t want to excuse him, but you’re his best friend and he does worry about you – and I just wondered – ” Hermione found it quite interesting that he had used the term “best friend” and not “girlfriend”. He withdrew his hands from his pockets, and looked at her intently. “I know I’m not your father, Hermione. But if you ever need anyone to talk to...about anything...well, I’ve some experience with fatherly talks, you know, and – ”

He stopped speaking abruptly, as Hermione moved over to hug him tightly, tears brimming in her eyes. He hesitated just a moment before putting his arms around her, and patting her softly on the back, saying something that sounded like, “There, there.”

After a moment, she stepped away, sniffing loudly, and wiping the wetness from her cheeks with her hands.

“Thank you, Mr. Weasley,” she said. “That – that really means a lot to me.”

“All right then,” he whispered, trying to sound casual, but his eyes gave him away. He winked at her and chucked her chin, before slipping back down the hallway. Hermione backed up towards Ron’s bunk, sitting down on it automatically, her eyes distantly staring. Daddy, she thought wistfully, picturing her father in her mind’s eye, even though she hadn’t called him that in years. Has it only been a year? Has it already been a year? It didn’t seem possible. Harry was looking at her, with such a sorrowful, guilty expression. And then

they'd virtually collided with each other, both crying, both swearing that they would make it right.

Well, we've done a bang up job with that, haven't we? Hermione thought derisively. Harry's lost his magic, and I've no wand, and we're in hiding from Voldemort, whose followers outnumber us significantly, and...

She stood abruptly, as if by standing she could turn off the stream of negative thoughts that rushed and swirled through her mind. She shouldered her knapsack, schooling her features into that determined, defiant expression that she often wore when attacking some kind of Arithmancy problem that refused to be solved. Resolutely, she strode through the door, and nearly knocked down Tonks.

"Whoa, sorry, Hermione," Tonks said, catching herself on the doorframe, and smiling a little sheepishly. She quickly and efficiently shrunk down the mattresses and bedsteads, depositing them into a duffel bag. A clanking noise issued forth as they collided with the other beds. "You ready to go?" Hermione nodded, and followed Tonks down the hall, amazed at how bare and abandoned the Shop already looked. The door that had once been a closet was hanging open, and Hermione could see a large, carved out, cavernous looking, empty space. This must have been where they put the vault, she realized.

When they passed Harry and Ginny's room, the door was open and the room was dark and completely empty. An odd sort of yearning washed through Hermione, making her unsteady on her feet.

"Where's Harry?" The words tumbled through her lips before she could bite them back, her desperation driving her to the question, heedless of pride or appearances.

"Minerva's taken him – and Ginny – on to Cornwall. She had to Side-along them... made two trips. Arthur's going to go with Fred, Neville, and Luna, and then Remus and I will go with you and Ron. Can you carry this?" Tonks handed her the duffel bag, which was heavy, but not unmanageably so, and strode into the War Room. Hermione followed.

The War Room was completely empty, walls bare, devoid of even the colored pins that had been tacked onto the maps in various places. Tonks shouldered a pack that made it look as if she were headed for a mountain-climbing expedition, and Remus had one of similar size. Hermione looked around the room in awe. She was still more familiar with the Muggle method of moving, and this, the realization that every stick of furniture was in someone's backpack, was stunning, to say the least. It also brought home the fact that they would not be able to acquire much through "normal" means, and would need every single piece of furniture that they could carry.

"Hello, Neville...Luna," Hermione said politely to her two schoolmates. It seemed like she hadn't seen them in years, rather than weeks. They both looked decidedly worse for the wear, their full night of sleep notwithstanding. Neville's face was pale and strained, one eye beginning to turn a beautiful purple-blue. Luna looked as vague as always, though her hair was lank and tangled as though she'd forgotten she had any. Her butterbeer cork necklace had been broken, and she was carrying the half-filled strand the way a child would drag a beloved teddy bear behind. Her wand was tucked behind her ear.

They both muttered unimportant replies, and Hermione felt the silence grow long and awkward. She had never been great at social niceties, and the chasm between them felt so vast. Hadn't they been in the D.A. alongside her? They had helped defend Hogwarts after Malfoy let the Death Eaters in. She had just seen them at graduation. Why then did she feel so separated? Perhaps the distance isn't between me and them, but between me and everybody. She sighed.

"What've you got?" she asked Fred with sincere curiosity, turning to him rather abruptly. He had his knapsack from the day before, as did Ron, but Fred was also holding a large laundry bag that appeared to be bulging slightly, occasionally emitting a noise or glowing ever so slightly.

"The entire stock of Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes," Fred said, holding up the bag. "I figured we can use at least some of it."

"You've emptied the store," Hermione breathed. She thought of the darkness powder, as well as the other defense items they'd started stocking before Hermione's sixth year. Yes, those things could be useful.

"Can't let the genius of the Weasley twins go to Death Eaters, can we – ?" Fred joked, turning his head to the left, almost automatically, before freezing and stopping the motion jerkily, as if remembering something. Of course...George was not there. Hermione swallowed hard, and mustered a tight-lipped smile at the usually incorrigible Weasley. Ron was standing in a corner, alone, withdrawn, his hands in his pockets. His head had been down, as if he were studying his shoes intently, but had come up to regard Fred, at his last comment. Hermione looked at Ron with teary eyes, her forehead crinkling apologetically, and mouthed the words,

"I'm sorry." He nodded and mouthed back,

"I'm sorry too." She drifted across the room toward him, and leaned into a one-armed hug, closing her eyes, as her head touched his chest. "I don't want to fight with you, Hermione," he whispered. "Especially when – when things are – when – "

"When everything's gone to blazes?" she finished, looking up at him with tear-studded lashes, stuck together in starry, wet clumps. He brushed some of the dampness from her cheek with a thumb, and she half-laughed, in an embarrassed way. "I feel as if all I've done for days is cry," she said.

"That's not all you've done," Ron remarked sarcastically, and Hermione took a half-step away from him, her eyebrows furrowing with hurt. "Hermione!" he hastened to say. "I'm not angry anymore. I'm – I'm not even sure I should've been angry to begin with. You saved him, and I'm glad. Okay? Just – just promise me, you'll always be careful." She nodded at him, craning her head back to look him in the face.

"I promise," she said simply, and he leaned down to kiss her lightly on the lips. She was surprised, because Ron was not one to engage in public displays with her, always seeming to view her as somehow

above that kind of nonsense. Neither had the past year afforded many opportunities to do so privately. Harry had always—

Hermione stiffened suddenly, and stepped back from Ron, adjusting the strap of her bag, and looking toward the others, refusing to answer her own inner questions about why Ron's kiss made her feel uncomfortable and guilty.

"Are you two ready?" Tonks asked, with a hint of amusement in her tone, though her eyes were quite serious. Hermione nodded, flushing slightly and not looking at Ron.

"You've got to read the coordinates," Remus said, holding out a piece of paper, similar to the one they'd had to read to enter Grimmauld Place. After they'd all looked at it, Remus lit it with his wand, and in silence, they all watched the paper burn, until it sifted from the werewolf's fingers in ashes.

Hermione was amazed by the emotion she felt on leaving this place. Always leaving, she thought glumly. She'd left Hogwarts, left Grimmauld Place, left home – and all in violent, abrupt ways, it seemed. She looked at the gutted, desolate empty places of the Shop, and felt the same way. Ron had come up beside her, and was regarding her solemnly, seeming to read and understand how she felt. As the group of them, headed up the stairs, lagging well behind Neville, Luna, Fred and Mr. Weasley, who would Apparate first, Ron gently took her hand in his.

Her heart thumped once and quite painfully in her chest, and she struggled to keep her breathing even. She strove against the instinct to worm her hand out of his grasp. God, I love him so much, she thought desperately, not even clearly sure to which "him" her pronoun referred. I love them so much. What am I going to do?

The house in Cornwall was beautiful, though it looked slightly unkempt from the outside. It was a rather rambling stone house of indeterminate age that stood all by itself near the edge of a rocky face that plunged steeply into the ocean. The soothing ebb and flow of rushing ocean colliding with placid land was constantly audible. A rutty, twisted lane ran off into the distance, where a handful of lights

could be seen gathered into a clump of a village. Hermione inhaled, taking in the tangy flavor of the sea air. This is nice, she thought, or would be if...

They trooped into the vestibule of the house, where those who had Apparated just before them were standing, looking around rather uncertainly. Remus immediately began working on arming the wards, having dropped his bag on the front porch unceremoniously. McGonagall came down the stairs, wiping at her hands with a damp cloth.

"The bedrooms are all upstairs," Tonks said perfunctorily. "There's room for four or five beds per room. Could you set those up?" She looked at Hermione, who still had the duffel bag with the bedsteads in it sitting on her shoulder.

"Sure," Hermione agreed, adjusting the weight of the bag and heading up the stairs. She could still hear Tonks' voice indistinctly, as she delegated tasks to the other Order members, and whatever she told Ron to do elicited a loud groan from Ron and a chortle from Fred. A smile glimmered across Hermione's face momentarily, as she put her hand on the first doorknob, opening it soundlessly.

She stood uncertainly in the doorway. This room was large, well-appointed, and full of light from two good-sized windows. It was also already furnished. Five beds lined the same wall, facing two armoires and what Hermione assumed was a potions cupboard. Harry and Ginny were in two of the beds. She had stumbled into what would be their infirmary. Her eyes drifted unwillingly to the other three beds, wondering who would eventually occupy them.

Shaking her head as if to dispel such morbid thoughts, she turned her gaze to Harry, who was quite still, his chest rising and falling with deep, even breaths. Hermione didn't think she could ever have felt so gratified to hear someone breathing, drawing in air at the restful pace of deep slumber. She pulled the duffel bag off of her shoulder, and was dimly aware of it hitting the floor with a quiet thud. The metal bedsteads within it clanked in protest. There was a wooden stool positioned near the potions cupboard, and Hermione dragged it behind her, as she moved to Harry's bedside.

She sat heavily on the stool, propping her elbows on her knees, and clasping her hands beneath her chin. She sighed, watching Harry sleep for a moment, before restlessness drove her from her sitting position. She felt jumpy, distracted, nervous, like there was something she needed to accomplish in a limited amount of time, and she couldn't find the wherewithal to begin it. She paced around the room, her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, and thought furiously.

I need a wand. She was as good as useless without one...especially if her magic continued to be as unreliable and rudimentary as it seemed to be with Harry's wand. No Death Eater was going to stand still long enough for her to cast Stupefy enough times to actually bring him down. If I had my wand I could replace my medallion, make Harry one...Neville, Ginny, and Luna as well, and I could start working on those portkeys. Maybe I could figure out how to make them untraceable. I reckon we've brought our library, she thought idly, her gaze going out the window. The ocean was a dark void, an utter lack of light extending to the horizon. It would be nice to walk on the beach sometime, she mused, have the waves lapping at your feet, feel the wind in your hair... if only...

There were too many if onlies. If only the war hadn't driven everything that was decent and normal and comfortable away from them. If only there had not already been so much loss – and the promise of more – and not even the time or space to deal with it properly. If the threat of Voldemort had not been so real and all-consuming, maybe she and Ron could have had a normal relationship. If they'd had a normal relationship, devoid of the horcrux hunting and mortal peril, maybe she wouldn't be – maybe he wouldn't have said – maybe...

She sighed angrily, and swore under her breath, feeling suddenly sad and tired. She wanted her mother. Her mother, with her chestnut hair pulled neatly back from her face into a barrette, her mother, with her calm, knowing eyes, and the soothing smile that could instantly calm Hermione's frantic, panicky nature. She would know what to do, she thought. Ron's drawn, dazed face floated into her mind, his broken voice choking over the recounting of the last moments of his mother. Then she thought of Harry, his wary eyes regarding her as if she

were something loathsome. Is this the game where... we've done that one already. She leaned on the windowsill, feeling the comforting coolness of the glass against her face.

"Hermione?" the questioning voice caused her to whirl from the window, bracing herself behind her with both hands on the windowsill. Her eyes flew to Harry's bed quickly, before she realized that he was still asleep and had not been the one who'd spoken. Ron was standing in the doorway, leaning over the threshold, with his hand on the knob. Her hands fluttered distractedly around her hair before settling at her sides, and she knew she must have looked as flustered and at loose ends as she felt. His eyes were measuring her carefully, and then drifted down to the duffel bag she'd discarded on the floor.

"The beds? Right! Sorry," she blurted in short staccato burst, grabbing the bag and nearly sprinting from the room. They went to the next room down, which was empty, and Hermione began pulling out and placing the miniature beds, after which Ron enlarged them.

"Tonks forgot that you could set them up, but couldn't make them normal-sized," Ron had explained as they entered the room. She had smiled a little self-consciously at him, but had not made a reply. Wordlessly, moving almost as a unit, they moved to the next bedroom.

"How's Harry?" Ron finally asked blandly.

"You saw for yourself how he was," Hermione said, a trifle snappishly, almost immediately wincing at her own tone. "Sorry," she apologized again. "I just – "

"Hermione, it's okay," Ron said, shrugging one shoulder sheepishly. "Everyone certainly has the right to be a little – "

"Addled?" she replied, smiling at him a little.

"Yeah," he said, smiling back...a real one that seemed to reach his eyes. Hermione was suddenly and forcefully reminded of why she did love him – the question of whether or not she was in love with him remaining thankfully unexplored for the time being.

After the fourth room, they had run out of beds, and made their way back down the corridor to the lower level of the house, where all was still bustling. Neville and Luna were in the kitchen, cooking some kind of soup, under the rather absent-minded supervision of Mr. Weasley, who was leaning out of the kitchen window, speaking with Remus and Tonks. The latter two were checking the strength of the wards, zapping the protective spells with various hexes. Hermione wondered about the inherent wisdom of eating anything that Luna Lovegood had helped prepare. She did not see either Professor McGonagall or Fred, and wondered if they were in the infirmary with Harry and Ginny, but then saw that the house extended further beyond the living room, and wondered if that's where the library and new War Room would be.

At length, her suppositions were confirmed, when the two absent Order members entered the kitchen from the back of the house.

"I think we've got it all worked out," Fred said in a serious tone, looking at Ron. Ron seemed to be speaking to his brother without words, and nodded gravely after a moment. He moved over to murmur something to his father, who leaned out the window again, and informed Remus of something that she did not quite catch.

"What's going on, Ron?" Hermione asked in an urgent whisper, watching in bemusement as Ron became distinctly uncomfortable. "Ron?" she persisted.

"The Order's going to raid St. Mungo's," he finally muttered, after obviously realizing that he would not get her to break eye contact until he answered her.

"That's brilliant! If we can get into their apothecary, we can – " Hermione began, stopping when Ron's eyes shifted uneasily from hers again.

Oh, right. No wand, the realization flooded Hermione's mind, and she simply lost the desire to continue talking. Feeling her eyes fill with tears again, this time born of pure frustration, she turned suddenly to face the living room, feeling like a child, angry, useless, and embarrassed.

“Hermione, someone would have to stay with Harry and Ginny anyway. You’ll be needed here,” Mr. Weasley added, in a soothingly cheerful voice, from behind her.

“Of course,” she stammered in a hoarse, disappointed voice, dashing her tears away with the back of her hand. Ron was looking at her with an odd, furtive expression. Was that – was it pity? Hermione felt her chin begin to lift, almost of its own accord. There are other things to worry about, Hermione! She berated herself stridently. People are dead, we’re in a war, and you’re worried about being left out?

“This place is as sound as a drum,” Remus said in a satisfied voice, as he and Tonks came back inside. By unspoken consent, the Order drifted toward the back of the house, for the new War Room, ostensibly to discuss the upcoming raid. Hermione lingered behind to remove the large pot of soup from the heat, and trailed along behind the others.

The War Room was large, and had the contents of the Shop library lining the walls. The maps and pins had been newly hung on the walls, and the tables and chairs were set up in a meeting-of-the-minds, conference kind of way. Hermione stood listlessly in the doorway, unsure as to whether she was needed, required, or even wanted to be at this meeting at all. The others had settled into chairs, and Tonks pulled a clipboard from the nearest shelf, and consulted it studiously.

“We’re going to need teams at St. Mungo’s and Gringotts,” she said thoughtfully, after a moment.

“Wait a minute... Gringotts?” Fred asked, before Hermione could do it.

“We need to empty out everyone else’s vaults,” Remus explained. “From what Hermione’s told us,” he nodded at her, “the goblins are willing to cooperate with us. If we can get some of that changed into Muggle money as well, we’ll be able to move about more effectively... more invisibly, as it were.”

“As for St. Mungo’s,” McGonagall spoke up, “absolutely anything that we can lay hands on would be of use...any potions, medical

equipment...even a healer, if there's one who we can trust to be sympathetic to our cause. Harry's going to be fine...at least, physically, but if there is any kind of cutting edge research on restoring magical ability... And Ginny..." she trailed off, shooting an uncharacteristically uncertain glance at Arthur Weasley.

"I know that you've done everything you know to do, Minerva," Mr. Weasley replied, and Professor McGonagall's mouth pursed up into a tighter bow of frustration.

"The problem is, Arthur, that what I know to do simply isn't enough! If only we'd been able to locate Poppy."

"Well, surely we can find someone," Ron put in, leaning forward earnestly and gesturing with his hands. "I mean, the Death Eaters can't very well kill all the healers, can they? There's got to be more of us than there are of them, right? I mean, once everyone's gotten over their fright...there are more good people than evil," his eyes seemed distant, and Hermione could only guess at the death he saw there. "Even now, right?"

"That's something I don't understand," Hermione spoke up suddenly from the doorway. "How are there so many Death Eaters? If there were this many before... I mean, they could have taken over any time they wanted. Where did they all come from?"

"Voldemort has been recruiting on the continent," Tonks put in.

"But with enough numbers to completely overwhelm us?" Hermione countered. "Every Death Eater I heard spoke English. And to strike all those places at once...I just don't understand."

"Perhaps that was what did it," Neville spoke, stammering slightly as all the attention centered on him. "By striking so many places at once, he could catch everyone off their guard."

Hermione didn't reply, but her forehead was creased in deep, worried thought. There has to be a reason, she mused.

“Remus and I will go to Gringotts. Everyone should give us their vault keys. We can only hope that the goblins will continue to help us in every way that they can,” Tonks said.

“You’ll have to be careful,” Hermione said. “Death Eaters were pulling people aside for no reason at all. You ought to glamour yourselves up – not that that’s a problem for you, Tonks – and maybe cast the Distraction charm on yourselves too.”

“That’s a good idea, Hermione,” Remus said, and Hermione felt momentarily better.

“I want Ron, Luna, Neville, and Arthur to go to the Quibbler offices,” Tonks continued. “We’ve got to see if there’s any equipment we can use, perhaps anonymous owls that couldn’t be traced to us. It would be good if we can find out any news as well – we’ve been kind of cut off so far. If this movement is going to work at all, we’ve got to be able to communicate with others who want to act as well. That leaves Fred and Minerva for St. Mungo’s.”

“Please!” Neville said abruptly, interrupting Tonks. “Please, can I go to the hospital as well?” Tonks had frozen, and appeared on the verge of turning him down, before she realized why he was asking. She smiled at him slightly, and murmured,

“Of course, Neville.” She looked around at the rest of the Order, as if to ascertain their state of mind, and slapped both hands on her thighs. “Well, it will be light soon. Let’s eat, get a little rest, and we can set out as soon as things begin to open for normal business. We ought to split into our mission groups over breakfast, and go over specific plans.” Tonks looked very serious, clearly in her Auror element.

Hermione felt her shoulders sag, and she turned up the stairs while the others made their way into the kitchen. She really did not feel like eating soup for breakfast, and her stomach was churning with frustration and helplessness anyway. Without even consciously thinking, she found herself in the infirmary again.

Harry was awake.

She could tell by the more rigidly held lines of his body beneath the sheet, as well as the way his head was turned markedly away from the door toward the window. His body tensed as she opened the door, but he did not turn toward her.

“Good morning,” she ventured, sounding a little timid.

“Is it?” he asked dully, and she hesitated, unsure whether he was asking if it was good, or if it was morning.

“Are you hungry?” she finally asked, and he shook his head, still looking out the window. “They’ve got some stew or something downstairs. I think Luna’s made it though.” There was a quavering, nervous laugh in her voice that Harry did not respond to.

“No, I’m fine. Thank you.” The inanity of the conversation made Hermione want to cry, or maybe throw something across the room. Her best friend had been present in the cell at the Riddle house, had been present in the Quidditch field and the Shop. Where had he gone now? Had what he’d been through finally been too much now that the shock had worn off?

“Um... they’re – the Order is getting ready to – to go on a mission,” she stuttered, cursing herself for acting like an uncertain little ninny in front of Harry, whom she’d certainly seen moody before. He turned toward her then, a flicker of interest in his eyes.

“What for?” he asked.

“They’re going to St. Mungo’s,” she replied, her eyes flickering toward Ginny, and his gaze following hers.

“Right,” he said, in a voice so low that the word was nearly a sigh. She watched him watch Ginny for a moment, and wondered if he regretted any of the choices he’d made. After a moment, he looked at her again, his searing eyes seeming to penetrate to the very core of her soul. She shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot. “Why aren’t you down there?” he finally asked.

“No wand,” she said shortly, and, as if those two words had released some kind of pressure valve, all of Hermione’s uncertainty and frustration spewed forth. “It’s gone and now I can’t do anything. I can’t help on the mission, I can’t replace the medallions, I can’t try to make more voice-activated portkeys. I just feel so stupid and so – ”

“Useless?” Harry supplied, and the bitterness in his voice stunned her. Too late, she realized to whom she’d been talking, to whom she’d been disclosing her irritation and annoyance at not being able to perform magic. Damn. Her forehead creased anxiously over her large, brown eyes.

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry.” The evident sincerity in her apology made the tension in Harry’s face abate a little.

“So am I,” he remarked, still with a trace of rancor in his tone. The silence seemed to last eons, and Hermione groped for something to say. Seeing as how well what I just said went over, she sniped at herself.

“Everyone’s so glad to have you back,” she finally said.

“Why?” he blurted suddenly, the force of anger in his tone making her take a step back unconsciously. “I can’t do anything. I can’t help fight.” He glowered at her a little, before adding, “Even though I have a wand.” Her face must have melted a little in sorrow and regret, for he held up one hand as if to wave off his last comment. “I’m the Boy Who Lived – well, great! And for what? To what end?” What purpose does my life have now? I haven’t defeated Voldemort. We’re both still alive! He looked distantly out of the window again. “He’ll find me and kill me eventually. I can’t fight him.”

“Harry, we haven’t even begun to research methods to restore your magic. There could very well be a – ” Hermione tried to say.

“And while I’m waiting, hiding? Who is he killing? How many Muggle towns are being torched and gutted? Oh, but at least, I’m alive!” There was blistering agony in his voice, and it tore at Hermione.

“But – but m – morale – ” she stammered, hating herself for feeling so weak and small and helpless in the face of Harry’s emotion.

“How long will Harry-as-a-symbol be worth anything at all? Until everyone finds out I’m a Squib!” He answered his own question. “I’ve seen how fast the Wizarding World can turn on a person, Hermione. They’ll wish they’d served me up to Voldemort while they had the chance. Maybe he would have gone easier on them.”

“You know...you know he wouldn’t. Mercy and compassion are not even in his vocabulary, Harry,” she said sadly, struggling to regain her lost composure. He flashed her a dark look that clearly said, Yeah, found that out firsthand. Then he said,

“Arrogance and ruthlessness are. And you know what that means. He’s not going to stop until he finds me again. I’m just – just a liability now... putting everyone around me in danger.”

“You always did that anyway,” Hermione quipped, and then flinched as Harry jerked his gaze up to hers. Well, that was appropriate. When are you going to learn that it takes a special kind of nerve to get away with stuff like that? Ron has it. You don’t, she chastised herself. “If – if you every want to talk about – about anything...” she said, hastening to smooth over her ill-thought comment.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” he interrupted her smoothly, his face a mask. “I don’t want to think about it. But I see that room every time I close my eyes...” The façade had dropped, and the haunted look on his face pierced Hermione painfully. She moved toward him abruptly, her hand outstretched toward his, but checked her movement, somehow feeling that he wouldn’t welcome her touch right now.

“I – I’ll ask Professor McGonagall if it’s all right that I give you a Sleeping Draught,” she said softly, biting her lips together and looking at her feet. How in the world could Bitter Harry scare her so badly? In fifth year, she wouldn’t have hesitated to give him a piece of her mind. This is different, she told herself sagely. What happened is different. He is different... And how you feel about him is different.

It was a testament to Harry's desperation that he did not argue with her suggestion of a Sleeping Draught, but nodded and sighed, turning his face back toward the window, as she slipped from the room. Despair and hopelessness hung over that room with an almost tangible pall, she thought, as she closed the door behind her, and leaned against it, momentarily crumpling, with her face in one hand. She wasn't sure if she should flee from it or welcome it.

Hermione flitted about the house aimlessly, after the Order departed. She tried to sit in the War Room, books piled about her, researching ways to defy possible portkey tracers. The problem was, she mused thoughtfully, that they didn't even know how Voldemort had traced it. It was hard to stop something when you didn't have the faintest idea how it had occurred in the first place.

In any case, Hermione found her concentration severely impaired. The Order was out of contact. She didn't know how long they would be gone. And Harry was under the effects of a sleeping potion, and even if he hadn't been – well, he had made it clear that he didn't want to talk to anyone, not even her – or perhaps, especially not her. She wasn't sure which.

Her mind kept drifting, her paranoid imagination suddenly concocting fevered stories of the entire Order meeting their demise. I'll be alone again, she thought, remembering how it had felt to hide in the Forbidden Forest, the only one left alive, watching Death Eaters patrol the front gates of Hogwarts. I've never been so glad to see Remus in my life. She thought about her and Harry, effectively trapped, defenseless, stranded all alone in this old house out in the middle of nowhere. She shivered, the early afternoon sun streaming in the window even seeming ominous. Reflexively, she reached for Harry's wand that Tonks had found and retrieved for her before they'd left. It wasn't much, but it was better than nothing, she thought, twirling it between her fingers and looking at it critically.

She thought of Harry again, and stood suddenly, as if intent on peeking in and making sure he was all right, but she sat down again, just as abruptly. She was twitchy, drumming one set of fingers on the arm of the chair, and twirling the wand between the others.

She jumped violently, all but flinging the wand across the room, when the front door opened. Remus and Tonks had returned. Hermione tried to hide her burning face, by busying herself with retrieving the wand from under the table, as they came into the room. Straightening up and tucking Harry's wand in her pocket, she eyed them carefully.

They were both beaming.

"I'm dumping Remus to marry that goblin!" Tonks announced, one of the first unadulterated smiles that Hermione had seen in days spreading beautifully across her face. This news did not appear to bother Remus much.

"I gather you were successful," Hermione assumed, unable to not smile at the looks on their faces. "Death Eaters had no idea you were there, then?"

"Oh, they knew," Lupin replied, growing momentarily serious. "After we had visited the vaults, the goblin assisting us – his name was Klavrut – was about to lead us back into the lobby, when he was intercepted. He then said it was too dangerous to exit that way, and sent us off for a ride in the carts –"

" – not my favorite part! –" Tonks interjected.

" – while he changed some of the money into Muggle currency for us. Then he took us down to some of the lower tunnels, and let us out a secret back entrance. I don't think any human has ever been out that way before," Lupin's face was full of wonder at the actions of the goblins.

"I should hope not!" Tonks put in. "We had to walk bent in half for almost half a kilometer!"

"Anyone else back yet?" Lupin asked, and Hermione shook her head.

"You're the first," she replied simply. They hefted their bag between them, as they started down into the cellar off the kitchen, to put the vaults down there next to Harry's, Hermione assumed. She could

hear their voices still talking animatedly about their good fortune, echoing from the dark, steep stairs.

“Oy! Some help here!” came a Weasley bellow, and Hermione’s heart catapulted into her throat. She ran into the vestibule, as Fred and Professor McGonagall came into the house, levitating a barely conscious Neville between them. Loud thumping on the cellar stairs informed Hermione that Lupin and Tonks had heard the cry as well.

“What happened?” she asked, her eyes wide, as they began to levitate her former classmate up to the infirmary.

“All hell broke loose,” Fred told her grimly. “We’d gotten some useful files – information on potential contacts – and made it into the apothecary undetected – thanks to Harry’s cloak – and had absconded with quite a number of useful potions and ingredients, when some aide stumbled in on us, and freaked out. We stunned her, but the noise she made – oy!” He shook his head, as they deposited Neville in an empty bed, and Professor McGonagall began to anxiously scan him with her wand. “Death Eaters came from every bloody direction. We got split up, lost Neville, spent the better part of two hours skulking around the hospital looking for him, dodging patrols.” Hermione tried to imagine Professor McGonagall ‘skulking’ anywhere, and couldn’t quite achieve it. “We finally found him, Stunned, outside the ward where his parents are – er...were...” Fred trailed off, sadly.

“Oh, no!” Hermione cried softly, one hand moving to her mouth. She tried not to notice Harry’s pale, pinched face in the next bed over, listening intently to every word. “The Death Eaters – they – they – ?”

“You think they were going to let a bunch of crazies who aren’t useful or functional – and who weren’t even loyal when they were functional – live? They AK’d that entire ward first thing – or that’s what one of the mediwitches said.” Hermione’s brow was knit in disbelief.

“Pro – Professor Lockhart?” she asked stupidly. Fred nodded grimly.

“All of ‘em.” Hermione shook her head, vaguely aware of Harry’s turning toward Ginny, trying to ignore the people bustling around

Neville's bed. She knew that he was blaming himself again. If he'd never been born, maybe, Hermione figured he was thinking. Silly git. She wanted nothing more than to move over to his side, enfold him in her arms, lay her head on his shoulder, and assure him that everything was going to be okay – whether that was actually true or not.

"Is he going to be okay?" she asked Professor McGonagall. The older witch looked tired, her face seemed much more lined than Hermione ever remembered it being, but she nodded.

"He was hit with a Stunner, but that coupled with dueling Death Eaters, and the shock of his parents... I'm going to give him a Sleeping Draught. Harry, do you need – ?" She turned to him, but he bit out a negative response before she could even finish her sentence.

"The mediwitch Fred spoke with," McGonagall said. "I'll want your permission, but I'd like to ask her to come here, perhaps assist us?" She seemed to be speaking to nobody in particular, and Hermione lifted uncertain eyes to Remus and Tonks, who were loitering in the doorway. Tonks shrugged, and asked,

"Did you get her file?" The question was never answered.

There was suddenly tremendous commotion from downstairs. Feet clattered along the floor, and Hermione heard Tonks' muffled cry, as the Auror peered down the stairs. Someone was crying, and Ron was yelling something she couldn't understand, and... she froze, as the clamor moved up toward them.

Arthur Weasley was covered in blood, levitated by Ron, who was clearly struggling, and nearly completely obscuring Luna from sight. Ron was completely coated in the stuff, it was splattered across his clothes and matted in his hair. Hermione's eyes ran over him frantically, searching for a wound. Remus gently took over Luna's position, and helped Ron transport him the remainder of the way across the room.

"Dear heaven, what happened?" McGonagall said in shock, as she quickly moved out of the way for Mr. Weasley to be placed in a bed.

“We – we – ” Ron was in some kind of shock as well, and appeared nearly incapable of speaking. Luna stepped in.

“There was almost nothing at the Quibbler. The Death Eaters had already gutted it completely.” She said this in a very detached way, as if it had had nothing at all to do with her father. “So – so Mr. Weasley – he wanted to stop in at Ollivander’s on the way back, and see if – see if – ” Her jaw was trembling, and to Hermione’s horror, every eye in the room drifted to her.

“Someone saw us – reported us – ” Ron said, speaking as if a force other than himself was prodding him to speak. His eyes were wide and distant. “We were ambushed by an entire squad of Death Eaters. The leader – he – he pointed his wand at Dad. He never said a word!” Hermione stiffened, and sensed, rather than saw, Harry come to full attention in his bed. The Trio exchanged dark, knowing glances. Sectumsempra...Hermione thought, Snape. She remembered how shocked she had been when Harry had disclosed to her the truth regarding the former owner of his Potions book.

“If – if Luna hadn’t – she conjured up some kind of sticky shield – looked like a web... we – we got out the back door. He – he – ” Ron put both hands over his face for a moment, as if he could scrub away the memory of what had just happened. Professor McGonagall had been working feverishly over Mr. Weasley, obviously listening, as both Weasley boys moved to hover anxiously over their father. Hermione’s eyes shot to Harry’s face, which was pale and strained, and watching the blood-stained bed, as if he could save Mr. Weasley’s life by the mere power of his gaze.

Hermione didn’t even want to know what she looked like, though she could well guess: wild-eyed and horror-struck and guilty, guilty, guilty. Harry looked at her suddenly, and she thought she saw a flicker of sympathy there. Welcome to my life, it seemed to say.

“Come on, Arthur, come on!” McGonagall was muttering under her breath, probably without even realizing it. Her thin, old hands were almost a blur, as she barked orders to Remus, who unhesitatingly

and without question, retrieved desired components from the potions cupboard.

Luna stepped over to Hermione's side, and handed her a bag, whispering in her ear,

"He got these for you. They're all the same wood as your old wand. He figured – he figured you could find which one worked best for you." Luna's face was worried and sad, but the wide blue eyes were kind and non-judgmental. Hermione looked into the bag, and saw the gleaming dark wood of probably a dozen wands. She felt a tremor run convulsively over her body, and she began shaking her head, backing toward the door, as she dropped the bag of wands. It clattered loudly, even in the bustling room.

"No....no...." she said, holding up her hands, as if to ward somebody off. "I did – oh my God, it's my – it's all my – " She couldn't even get words out; her jaw was clattering open and closed, as if it had a life of its own. Her knees were wobbly, and she felt nausea and light-headedness swell up to claim her.

"Arthur!" The word was a sharp cry from Professor McGonagall.

"Hermione!" This was a low, concerned exclamation from Tonks. Hermione was shaking her head again, reflexively, unthinkingly. She was through the doorway, out into the hall. She could see Harry trying to get out of his bed, and Remus reprimanding him. Harry threw the covers back mutinously.

My fault, my fault, my fault. She thought of the hesitant words of comfort that Mr. Weasley had offered her earlier that day. She could still feel his arms around her, smell the comforting, familiar smell of his jacket. Her ears were ringing, and she could taste bile in her mouth. She knew she was going to throw up.

She fled.

TBC

I wanted to have more of Hermione falling apart in here, but any ensuing conversations would have made this chapter way long. I had a little trouble with it, because it is kind of transition-y, but I hope y'all liked it anyway.

You may leave a review on the way out, if you like. I have 160 reviews for this on another site. Can't imagine what the problem is here!

Chapter Seven: Schism

The floorboards thudded lightly under Hermione's feet as she flew through the house. Her eyes were half-blinded by scalding tears, and she scrabbled for a doorknob three or four times, before she could actually make it operate. Her breaths were coming in harsh, noisy gasps with a catch in the middle of them. She thought maybe her chest would explode, and she swallowed hard to stem the feeling of nausea.

Behind a small door at the far end of the corridor, was a flight of crooked, rickety steps leading upward. She lurched up them, stumbling, using her hands to help her navigate the steep stairway.

She emerged through another door into an attic, piled with rags and abandoned boxes, one small window at the far end allowing beams of sunlight in which innumerable dust motes danced. She walked toward the honey pool of sunlight, part of her desperately wishing to bask in the warmth for awhile and remember a time when life had been good. She heaved a sigh that was also part sob. She didn't deserve the sunshine. Because of her, Arthur Weasley had been seriously injured, was perhaps even now dying, and she was too much of a coward to even endure the consequences of her actions. Coward! The worst insult a Gryffindor could endure.

Her cheeks were stiff with drying tears that she could not remember crying. She turned deliberately away from the sunshine, and tucked herself into the dimmest corner of the attic, curled up on top of a dusty crate, and for the first time in her young life, really wished that she could die too.

My fault, my fault, my fault, throbbed in her head in sync with her heartbeat. If she had gotten help at the Riddle house, perhaps Voldemort would not have taken her wand. If Mr. Weasley had not gone to Ollivander's in an attempt to obtain for her a new one, then he – he – and here, hot tears fell afresh – he wouldn't have been injured. Everyone believed it, she thought, remembering the way all eyes had slowly drifted to her. Ron's face had been slack and gray, and he had looked at her with something indefinable glittering in his eyes.

If Mr. Weasley dies, we'll all be orphans. All of us. And it's my fault. She thought again, folding her arms around bent knees and burying her head in their comforting circle. I fought with Harry once about his "saving people thing". And I'm not any better. Did I think that I had to prove something to him – to anyone – by saving him on my own?

The crate sitting next to her was filled with dinnerware, she noted suddenly, pretty china plates, with a hand-painted yellow flower just visible through a gap in the protective brown butcher paper. It rustled slightly as she pushed it aside, and withdrew a delicate saucer only faintly smattered with dust; she turned it in her hands, contemplating the gold-leaf edges as if they contained the secrets of the universe. Her throat ached unbearably, and her eyes were burning.

Propelled by an uncontrollable impulse, she hurled the plate across the room, where it shattered quite satisfactorily. She stood then, uncurling herself from her position atop the crate, and selected another plate. She thought of baby Harry in his crib, his large bewildered eyes taking in the death of his mother, as, unaware, he faced down the most dangerous wizard of the modern age. The tinkling of the shards of china hitting the wall and bouncing to the floor was almost musical.

She thought of Bill and Charlie and George and Mrs. Weasley knocking Ginny out of the way of a flying curse. She thought of Mad-Eye Moody surrounded by Death Eaters, fighting to the very last. She thought of Ginny, pale and fragile and still, in an infirmary bed. Crash. Hot tears blurred her vision so that the plates looked only like iridescent white disks, exploding against the wall in sudden plumes of delicate, painted debris.

She thought of Percy and Fleur, their fate an enigma. She thought of Harry, green-lit in that awful cell, beaten, toyed with, tormented. She thought of Mr. Weasley, of the comforting feel of his arms and the smell of his tweed jacket. She imagined him passing by Ollivander's, stepping through the gaping doorway, searching through the mess for vine wands, hoping to find something she could use. Her breath was hitching in her chest; she was practically moaning with each

inhalation, as plates flew from her hands with the ease of unbelievable anger, a rising tide of indignation and self-loathing.

“Hermione?” came a voice, cutting so incisively through the noise of breaking dishes that Hermione jumped. She crouched back down on the top of her crate, the other stacks making her unable to see Harry at all, and remained silent. “Hermione, I know you’re up here.” She could hear his breathing now, and it sounded labored and weary. More guilt assailed her relentlessly.

“How did you know I was up here?” she blurted hoarsely and somewhat stupidly, and stood up from her concealed position. He was standing in the middle of the attic, in jeans and a t-shirt, barefoot, looking like a well-placed breeze could knock him over. His eyes floated over to the snowdrift of white china fragments.

“Other than the sound of shattering glass, you mean?” he asked tentatively, arching his brows quizzically, and looking more like Harry-at-Hogwarts than he had in a long time. A laugh bubbled unexpectedly from her lips, but turned almost immediately into a sob.

“Because this is where I would have come,” he answered simply. He looked like he would have said more, but there was a noisy clatter on the stairs, the attic door opened again, and Tonks practically fell into the room.

“Harry, what’s going on? I know I said I wasn’t going to come up here, but the noise – are you all right?”

“Everything’s fine, Tonks,” Harry said in a quiet, level voice. His eyes danced over toward Hermione, who was now standing awkwardly by the stacks of crates, with her arms akimbo. “Hermione was ... venting.”

“Ah,” said Tonks in a voice of comprehension. “Well, I’ll leave you to it, then,” she said, backing out of the door, but flashing a sympathetic smile at Hermione before she pulled it closed again.

“He’s not– ?” Hermione asked, her voice barely intelligible. She approached him, and her feet crunched grittily through the broken china. He held out his hand to her, and she laid her hand in his.

“He’s still alive,” Harry said quietly. Absently, he stroked her knuckles with his thumb. “McGonagall’s doing everything she can. And he’s strong. There’s plenty of Blood Replenishing potion.”

“He was looking for a wand – a wand for me...” she began, tilting her head back to look at him. He pressed her head to his chest, embracing her, and stroked one hand down the length of her wild hair. “He told me this morning that he – that he knew he wasn’t my fa – father, but if I ever wanted to talk – ” Her voice was high and wobbly.

“He wanted to help you, Hermione. He loves you as if you were his own daughter. He knew the risks.” Molly and I – we knew the possibilities... The dead weight was on her chest again, hot froth rising into her throat. She swallowed noisily.

“If I hadn’t – ” she began hoarsely, and then stopped, seeming to choose her words carefully. “If I hadn’t gone off on my own to rescue you...if I had gotten help, I might still have my wand, and he – and he would – ”

“Then that would make it my fault, right?” he said, trying to speak lightly, but his mouth was twisted into a bitter contortion, and there was no mirth in his eyes. “If I hadn’t been captured, you wouldn’t have come for me.”

Hermione felt like she was melting into a puddle of liquid, wet and sad and forlorn, curling in on herself.

“Harry!” she said in a protesting little whisper. He shrugged a little, and looked down at his bare feet, as if to wave off her scandalized cry.

“Mind if I have a go?” he asked, gesturing toward the crate of dishes. Hermione looked at him, more than a little mystified.

“You want to – to break plates?” she stammered uncertainly.

“You were,” he pointed out, without judgment.

“I was – I was – I’m ashamed of myself, Harry,” Hermione finally said, bracketing her forehead with one hand. “I – it’s all – there’s so much at stake – people’s lives are in danger! And – and I come up here and throw a tantrum like a two year old! I’m sorry, Harry.”

She stumbled to a halt, as she looked back up at him, and found him staring at her. There was a light in his eyes, but she wouldn’t exactly call his expression an uplifted one. She did get the distinct impression that he was seeing something that she was not, and she looked over her shoulder nervously.

“Harry?” she questioned, and he started, as the shine in his eyes was quenched. His shoulders slumped, and he stuck a hand in his pocket. She watched him curiously, wondering what he’d been thinking about when he’d looked at her just now, and why he looked again like the defeated Harry from earlier.

“S – sorry,” he stuttered, flushing slightly. “Wool-gathering.” He walked over to the crate she’d abandoned, stepping carefully to avoid any stray china shards, and lifted out a plate. This one was one somewhat larger, perhaps a dessert plate. Hermione was stricken with déjà vu, as he examined the plate closely for a moment, before turning and hurling it toward the wall. It hit a little higher than hers had, and made a louder impact. The fragments tinkled to the floor, joining Hermione’s already impressive mess.

He reached for another plate, and handed one to Hermione. She accepted it, and looked at him with a slightly bemused expression. He merely watched her, waiting, and she knew he didn’t understand why she felt odd throwing plates with a witness, when she’d been so efficiently destroying them before he’d arrived.

“Harry, I – ” she said in a demurring tone, trying to return the plate to him. He cut her off.

“Throw the plate, Hermione,” Harry said flatly. It was almost an order, and part of Hermione bristled at his peremptory tone.

“I’ve already made such a mess of – of everything, Harry. And someone else is going to have to clean it up, and – and – ” She could no longer tell if she was talking about the china or something different. “I’m okay, really. I’m just going to go now – there’s some research I could be – ” She started to head for the exit, but he reached out and gripped her upper arm. She stopped and looked at him with mild surprise, knowing that she could have easily gotten away from him in his diminished capacity.

“Just throw the damn plate, please!” he said in a weary voice.

“W – why?” she asked, sounding genuinely confused.

“Why were you doing it before?”

“I – I guess I was angry and – and scared...” she ventured, her brows knit above wide, wet eyes.

“And you can be angry, Hermione,” he said, as a flash of that emotion appeared in his green eyes. “This is not okay – what’s happened to us – what he’s done to us – to everybody – is not okay. And we can be angry.” He threw the plate without looking, and when it crashed against the wall, Hermione started. His jaw was trembling with repressed feeling. “And we can be scared. And we can be ashamed. And we can be frustrated. And we can feel helpless. And we can want justice.” With every sentence, he threw a plate, and when he finally stopped, looking at her expectantly, she threw hers too.

After a slight hesitation, she had joined him at the side of the crate, and together, they wordlessly and expeditiously began to empty it completely. She began to feel the anger thrum through her, felt as if it were blazing out of her eyes and crackling from the ends of her hair. If I had my wand and Voldemort was in front of me right now...she thought. She was reaching for one of the last few plates left, when Harry sudden stopped, and stalked over to the window, staring out of it pensively.

Hermione dropped the plate back into the crate, where it cracked into several large pieces.

“Harry, what’s the matter?” He raked her with a dismal look, his eyes clearly saying, What’s the matter? Everything’s the matter! He shoved his hands in his pockets, and leaned against the window with one shoulder. Hermione thought that he looked like he wanted to tell her something, but wouldn’t let himself. Too much of that little boy in the cupboard under the stairs, she mused, and smiled at him encouragingly.

“I miss it,” he finally said, staring out at the indistinct horizon where the ocean met the sky. He didn’t have to be specific; she knew to what he was referring. His magic.

“I know,” she said simply. “I’m sorry.” It was inane; it was unhelpful; it was cliché. But it was true. She had never meant anything more sincerely in her life.

“Everything’s happened so fast,” he iterated abruptly, subsiding again into silence. Hermione nodded. Only five days...five days since the world came to an end.

“If we’d – if I’d found you sooner...” she stammered unevenly, but he held up one hand to stop her.

“Hermione, don’t,” he said, almost gently. “That dampening field was keyed to me. I sat there, tied up, while Voldemort and Lucius Malfoy tuned it to the frequency of my magic. It hurt like hell. And it just – it just sucked the magic away. Yours was only suppressed for awhile. But mine is – it’s – ” She saw his eyes film over, and she laid one hand softly on his arm. “There’s something – it’s been there all my life, and I didn’t even notice it was there, until I didn’t feel it anymore. I don’t feel it anymore.” He hung his head, and the messy fringe of his bangs hung over the edge of his glasses, obscuring his face from her. “You didn’t even know you were doing it, did you?” he asked, and she blinked at him in confusion. “Get another plate,” he instructed, and she did so.

Then she noticed. She reached down to get the plate, and when her outstretched hand was still about an inch away, the plate rose the rest of the way to meet her. She had not even noticed it, but Harry had, and it had brought his loss back to him afresh.

Hermione didn't really know how to respond to that. She had been hoping with every fiber of her being that this would be a temporary condition for Harry, like hers had been, only perhaps longer because of his more protracted exposure. To hear him state so baldly that he no longer sensed the active core of magic within him – it scared her, badly.

He looked at her again, abruptly, bringing his head up with an almost wrenching motion of his neck. Without really meaning to, she took a step back, flinching away from the waves of emotion pouring from those blazing green eyes.

"Do you know what that means? Do you know what it all means?" Hermione felt as if she'd been wading in shallow water and the ground had vanished from under her feet. She felt as if she'd complacently gone to class, thinking she was prepared, only to find that there was a major examination that she'd forgotten about. She clutched desperately at something he'd said earlier, in the infirmary. I'm just a liability now.

"You're not just a liability, Harry," she replied softly. The truth was: he'd always been a liability, his presence had always upped the danger factor exponentially. But he'd always had his magical power, his ability to think on his feet, his irrepressible courage in the face of apparently insurmountable odds. How many of his assets had been irreparably damaged? And where did that leave the balance of his ledger?

"This is war, Hermione!" His voice was blistering again. "You can't afford to be sentimental. You have to – " he continued, but she had drawn herself up to her full height, now quietly angry.

"Sentimentality is what keeps us from being Death Eaters," she said, biting off each syllable in a clipped, level, dangerous voice. "Sentimentality has kept us alive so far." He looked like he wanted to argue with her, but she pressed on. "Why do you think I came after you? Why do you think I wanted to find you so badly?" Her voice cracked in the middle of a sentence, and she fluttered a hand listlessly in front of her throat. "I've got news for you, Harry Potter! It

had nothing to do with wanting to retrieve our weapon for defeating Voldemort!" He blinked at her, slightly startled. He opened his mouth to speak, and Hermione rushed onward, before he could ask a question that she did not want to answer. "I know you've lost a lot in the last few days. Everybody has, but you really didn't have much left to lose, and it – but don't shut yourself away from sentiment. There are people here who love you – and not because of any ability to do magic." She looked up into his eyes, willing all of her love for him to show in her own, wanting desperately for him to see how much he was needed, even now. "You still have it, you know – the Power He Knows Not."

He was looking at her as if he'd never seen her before, and she panicked, suddenly wondering if she'd gone too far, said too much. He reached out and took the tips of her fingers in his – so that they were just barely holding hands.

"Haven't you wondered yet, Hermione, why Voldemort always used you?" he asked her, his eyes fixed intently on her face. He knew there was nothing worse he could do to me, his words rang in her ears, and she suddenly felt as if she couldn't breathe properly. Something fragile and new and not altogether unwelcome was there, in the dusty, discarded atmosphere of the attic. She could feel it trembling around them, suspended between them. She could hear it in her roaring pulse, in the uneven puffs of breath from her nostrils; she could feel it in the light touch of his fingers to hers.

A banked fire flared up in his eyes, and her hand quivered against his. She parted her lips to reply, but before she could, they both heard a heavy tread on the attic stairs. Harry dropped her hand, and they both turned expectantly toward the door, the moment – whatever it had been or meant – now lost.

It was Ron. He was pale, and seemed to have aged half a decade in the last few minutes. His shirt was dried, stiff, and rusty with blood, and Hermione could still see where it had congealed in his hair. Is Mr. Weasley dead? Hermione's heart had moved up to lodge in her throat, and she could not speak.

“How’s your dad?” Harry asked, his voice laced with genuine concern. Ron seemed to take ages to answer the question, as if the reply were some heavy weight that he had to dredge up from the depths.

“Professor McGonagall thinks he’s going to make it,” said Ron, with great effort. Hermione saw Harry visibly relax, as her own eyes slid closed with thankfulness. She moved toward Ron, ducking into the circle of his arms, as the ability to stand seemed to leave him. She helped him walk over to a crate and sit down.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, Ron. I didn’t think it would – ” Her voice became a rapid murmur, even as she was still vaguely aware that Harry stood in the middle of the garret, watching them. He cleared his throat roughly.

“Reckon I’ll go back downstairs,” he said loudly. Ron did not even appear to realize that Harry was in the room; the redhead looked dazed and fatigued. Hermione turned when he spoke, from where she was kneeling beside Ron, and their eyes connected with a force that physically jolted her.

“Harry – !” she began, and then realized that she didn’t have any idea what to say. She could read his face, but it was a tangled mishmash of emotions; his eyes looked disappointed, disgusted – with himself or with her? – resigned, and – there was compassion there too.

He backed toward the door, as if he was unable to stop himself from meeting her eyes, and she watched him go, even as her fingers absently played along Ron’s shoulder, alternately patting and rubbing. When he finally turned toward the door, Hermione stiffened and inhaled suddenly, as if the removal of his gaze was something physical that had been ripped away.

The door closed behind him, and she couldn’t even hear the light sound of his bare feet on the stairs. She turned back to Ron, her expression sorrowful and apologetic.

“Ron, I’m so glad your dad is all right,” she said sincerely, and he really looked at her, for the first time since he’d entered the room. He

leaned forward, propping his elbow on his knees, and she linked her arm with one of his, leaning against his knees as well.

“Hermione, I’ve never been so scared in my life,” he said, in that dazed, shell-shocked voice of one who has seen too much and simply can no longer process what he’s seeing. “I couldn’t lose him too. I couldn’t lose him too.”

“He’s going to be okay now, though,” Hermione shushed him, whispering soothingly. Ron dragged his eyes from whatever distant horrors they’d been seeing, and met her gaze again.

“He wanted you to have a wand.” He didn’t say this with an accusing note in his voice, but more with a tone of wonderment. Hermione’s throat closed up.

“I – ” she tried to say.

“I was against it,” Ron said. “I thought we should come back another day, when we’d planned for it. Or that we should try to find some wand merchant who’d make us a deal. But he wanted to. Said that everyone should be able to feel needed.”

“Yes,” Hermione ventured, tears finally spilling from her eyes. Her skin felt taut, stretched too much over her swollen face. “But I didn’t ask him, Ron – I didn’t say anything. I wouldn’t have – ”

“I needed you. Why hasn’t that ever been enough?” Hermione did a double-take, thinking that perhaps she hadn’t heard him properly. He was still hunched over his knees, wide-eyed, staring, and somehow Hermione knew that they weren’t talking about his father anymore.

“Ron, I don’t understand– ” Liar!

“You always have to be – be performing some brilliant new charm or spell, or doing something to save Harry or help Harry or fight for Harry. That’s what made you feel useful and needed. Why couldn’t I make you feel needed? I needed you.” Hermione flinched away from him. She did not want to have this conversation now, but his use of the past tense did not escape her.

“Ron, of course I need you. I’ll always need you.” She infused her words with all the depth of sincerity that she could convey, looking beseechingly at him with shiny chocolate eyes.

“Do you love me?” He speared her with a glance, his sorrowful blue eyes looking suddenly clear and sharp. So this is it, then, she thought.

“Of course I love you, Ron,” she said truthfully, though her voice fell a little flat.

“Then – then why are – why are we just sitting here?” he asked. He wasn’t talking about their location in a dusty, cluttered attic with fragments of china plates all over the floor. Hermione felt her posture draw upward and inward, almost in spite of herself, and she pursed her lips.

“I’m afraid I don’t know what you mean,” she said in her best Prefect voice, which caused Ron to swear colorfully, but not angrily. He sounded more sad and defeated, than irate. Guilt pounded through her body with the surge of her bloodstream. Can’t you even tell him the truth? Don’t you at least owe him that?

“Yes, you do, Hermione,” Ron said wearily. “When did we start dating? After Dumbledore died? How many dates have we actually been on? How much time have we spent alone? How many times have we – have we – ” he stumbled a bit here, but floundered on, “have we done anything at all without you – without your – ?” He couldn’t finish his sentence. His forehead was against his palms, his fingers threaded through his hair.

“Without my what, Ron?” Hermione asked, her voice nearly failing her completely.

“Acting like you wished you were somewhere else entirely,” he replied hastily, almost all in one breath. Hermione looked at him with wide, hurt eyes awash in tears.

“I never – ” she began with a hurt gasp, but then stopped. When he kissed me in the War Room at the Shop, I flinched away from him

because I – because I thought of H – Harry. Have I always done that? Dear God. “Ron – ” her throat was closing up, and her voice was little more than a croak. “Ron, we shouldn’t talk about this now. There are other things – it isn’t the time –” Later, please, later, the coward in her pleaded. I don’t need another thing in my life falling apart, and neither do you!

He lifted his head from his hands, and looked sideways at her, quizzically.

“That’s what you say every time we try to do something that a normal couple might do,” he pointed out. “We should help Harry. This isn’t the time for that, Ron,” he quoted without quite mocking her. “If it’s not the time for a relationship, and it’s not the time to break up, then what the hell is it time for exactly?”

Hermione’s eyes stung, and she felt like she wasn’t getting enough breath in her lungs. She stood to her feet blindly, pushing against Ron’s knee to help herself up. Time to break up, break up, break up, she thought dizzily. He had actually said it.

And then something like relief surged through her like a shot of liquor, burning on the way down, but then soothing with blanketing warmth – with a chaser of guilt.

“Do you want to break up?” she asked evenly, a trace of the acerbic Prefect creeping back into her voice. He looked up at her, with more evidence of the trademark Weasley ire. His ears were turning red.

“I don’t want to date someone who doesn’t want to date me back,” he replied, as caustically as she had. Hermione found herself wondering how they had gotten to this point, how things had been derailed so, from her concern for Mr. Weasley to this.

“I never said – ” Hermione began, not understanding exactly why she was fighting for this sad excuse of a relationship, unless it was because the last changes in her life had been so ghastly that she was now afraid of any change at all.

"There were a lot of things you never said," Ron interrupted, and the anger seemed to have ebbed away again, replaced only by a dreadful, sucking vacuum of hopeless weariness. His words were like a slap across her face. She decided to stop denying it.

"I'm sorry, Ron," was all she said. "Maybe if..." she trailed off, and the lingering wraiths of a thousand possibilities seemed to drift silently around the garret. Maybe if we'd gotten to frolic through our seventh year like we should have been able to...maybe if Dumbledore hadn't died...maybe if we hadn't been hunting horcruxes...maybe if Voldemort hadn't attacked with all the subtle finesse of a battleaxe...

"Yeah," Ron said, and they regarded each other solemnly for a moment. Hermione thought randomly that she had never felt such communion, such connection with Ron as she did at that moment. She and Harry were frequently at one accord, of one mind, honed to where they were practically precognitive of each other's thoughts. She and Ron had never had that harmony of spirit.

Until now...she thought bitterly, and the irony was gall in her mouth. The silence seemed to expand to infinity in every direction, like they were the only two humans left in the universe.

"We should go see how your father is doing," Hermione finally ventured tentatively, after clearing her throat. Ron nodded, solemnly, but absently.

Hermione's fingers had nearly closed around the doorknob, when she turned back to Ron, so suddenly that he nearly crashed into her.

"Are we going to be okay?" she blurted suddenly. "Harry is going to need us now, more than ever. We need to be able to handle this." Her eyes were serious and dark, but she felt a hot flush staining her neck and face, as Ron's countenance twisted into a thoughtful and somewhat bitter smile. He looked at her penetratingly, and she turned back toward the door quickly, grasping the door handle and twisted it roughly, plunging through the door and down the crooked stairs.

"He's my best mate, Hermione," Ron said solemnly, following her down the stairs. "I'm going to do my best." As they made their way

back to the infirmary, Hermione refused to meet Ron's gaze, wondering, half-afraid, just what it was that he'd seen in her face. When Ron slipped into the infirmary, Hermione could see the prone forms of Ginny, and Mr. Weasley two beds beyond. They were both still unconscious, though, as far as she could tell, the blood-spattered area had been thoroughly Scourgified. She watched Ron sink down into a spare chair at his father's bedside, and saw Harry, sitting up in his bed, but looking drained, track Ron's movement across the room, then look toward her. She watched him for a moment, her expression clearly troubled, and then backed away, closing the door softly behind her.

Tonks was sitting idly on the top steps, just a couple of meters away from the infirmary door. She slanted Hermione a sharp look, as the younger girl sat down beside her.

"Everything okay?" The Auror asked, nudging Hermione's shoulder with her own. Hermione shrugged with a very unconvincing why wouldn't it be okay? look.

"It's fine," she said dully. "How's Mr. Weasley?" Tonks was not to be sidetracked thusly.

"Well, first you and Harry were destroying the heirloom china of somebody or other in McGonagall's family – " Hermione made a wide-eyed face of alarm, but Tonks waved it off. "Don't worry about it. It can be repaired. All the better to shatter it again later, right?" She nudged Hermione and smiled, but Hermione didn't really respond. "Then Ron goes up, Harry comes down – looking like the opposing Seeker caught the Snitch, by the way – then you and Ron come down, not speaking, and he goes in, while you stay out here. He's not blaming you, is he?" she tacked on, eying Hermione suspiciously.

Hermione smiled then, a little gratefully at Tonks. She shook her head quickly.

"No, no. He's not blaming me." She paused and carefully chose her words. "This just brought up some issues that have been festering for awhile. I think we're through."

“Oh, Hermione, no!” Tonks said, in a soft and sympathetic voice, and Hermione could tell that she was imagining how she’d feel if she and Remus ended their relationship.

“No, it’s okay...really,” Hermione said, working up a pleasant, positive expression to help her convince Tonks. “I think that it’s just another thing in my life that’s gone wrong lately, but then – I’m still alive, I can still – ” do magic. Those words remained unspoken, but she got the impression that Tonks had understood exactly what she meant.

“And Harry?” Tonks prodded gently. Hermione looked blankly at her.

“Harry?” she echoed.

“Are you – is it because of Harry that – you – you and Ron – ?” she fumbled around, and Hermione blushed when she realized what Tonks was getting at.

“No, no, no,” she said rapidly. “This – this was... inevitable. Harry had nothing to do with it.” Keep telling yourself that, came a snide voice in her mind. “You never did tell me how Mr. Weasley was,” she remembered suddenly. Tonks’ mouth drew up on one side, and her eyes grew misty and distant.

“He’s holding his own. Minerva got the bleeding stopped, and that was the main concern. If his blood was adequately replenished in time, then he should be fine,” Tonks finished softly.

“If I – ” Hermione began, but Tonks halted her with a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“Hermione, nobody blames you. Arthur wouldn’t blame you. So you shouldn’t blame yourself. It could’ve as easily been Remus or me that got you a wand, but Arthur thought of it first. Have you tried them yet?”

It took Hermione a moment to figure out what the Auror was talking about, but then she remembered the discarded bag of wands, and the clatter they had made when the bag had fallen from her slack hand.

"I can't – I – I dropped it in – in the – " she stammered, feeling ashamed once again. Mr. Weasley risked his life to get you a wand, and you can't even bring yourself to see if any of them work!

"You should give them a try," Tonks suggested companionably. "That way, when Arthur wakes up, you can show him which one works." When Arthur wakes up...the simple words made Hermione's eyes tear up yet again.

"But Ron and Harry are – " Hermione tried again, feeling weak and childish. Tonks smiled, and Hermione got the impression that Tonks knew much more than she had been explicitly told.

"Gryffindor courage," Tonks quipped encouragingly, jerking her head in the direction of the infirmary. "Go on, then." Hermione looked wistfully at Tonks and sighed noisily, before getting to her feet, and rushing through the infirmary door before she talked herself out of it.

The bag that Luna had given her was propped against the wall next to the potions cupboard now, rather than out in the middle of the floor where she had dropped it. Her face burned with shame, as she realized that someone had had to move it, someone else who knew that she had spit upon Mr. Weasley's sacrifice. Waves of recrimination washed over her, threatening to sweep her away. She picked up the bag, and made herself walk over to the bedside by which Ron sat. She did not look at Harry, even though she could feel his eyes on her like physical weights.

"How is he?" she asked, in the hushed voice reserved for abiding places of the ill or injured. Ron nodded vaguely without looking at her, his eyes fixed on his father's face.

Clinging...the word drifted incongruously into her mind. That's what Ron was doing – what they all were doing, really – but for Ron, it was personalized in the form of his father. He was clinging to the little family he had left, to the concept of a world that had vanished forever, and he was going to have to pull himself up, or he was going to fall. Hermione watched him silently, thinking, worry creasing her forehead.

She could feel Harry watching them, and it sent a prickle between her shoulder blades.

“He’s stable for now,” Ron said, his voice rough and raspy sounding. “McGonagall said the next 24 hours are crucial. If he makes it that far...” then he’ll be all right. Mr. Weasley was pale, but seemed to be resting comfortably. There were fading pink weals slashed across his neck like the claw marks of some kind of ferocious beast. They disappeared beneath the neckline of the gown he wore, and Hermione was forcibly reminded of Harry’s description of the altercation with Malfoy in Moaning Myrtle’s loo. Blood swirled in the water. Harry stumbled backward in unadulterated shock and horror. Myrtle was shrieking at the top of her ...lungs?

She leaned down to kiss Mr. Weasley on the forehead, intending to take her leave, and let Ron wait and watch on behalf of his father and sister. Perhaps she would see if Fred would keep him company – knowing him, the incorrigible Weasley was probably in the War Room with Remus, plotting the Order’s next move. When she leaned down, the bag containing the wands swished forward with her, and clanked against the metal edge of the bedstead.

Ron’s eyes went to the bag and froze on it momentarily. Hermione stiffened and looked warily at him, expecting some kind of verbal castigation. Instead, he did something that Hermione thought odd. He looked over his shoulder at Harry, and then back at her, holding her gaze with a dark blue, pensive stare.

“I hope one of them works,” he said somberly, before turning back toward his father.

“Thank you,” she whispered, and made her way out of the room. She could feel Harry’s eyes on her, and heat flooded her face, but she did not look at him.

When she saw Tonks, still sitting casually at her post at the top of the stairs, she held up the bag, as if for her inspection.

“Could you get Fred?” Hermione asked. “I thought – I thought Ron might want Fred in there...for awhile. I’m going to go – ” she indicated

the wands she held, and jerked her head in the direction of the bedrooms down the hall.

“Remus wanted him to look at something, but they’re probably done. I’ll get him now,” Tonks said, standing to her feet, and starting down the stairs. “Good luck,” she tossed over her shoulder to Hermione, as she disappeared from sight around the corner.

“Thanks,” Hermione said to the empty hallway.

She went all the way to the farthest bedroom at the very end of the hall, and then sat on the bed farthest away from the door, the one by the window. She had already stowed her trunk underneath that bed. She placed the bag on the mattress beside her, and peered inside, not terribly enthusiastic about examining the wands. Whichever one of them works will always remind me of what it took to get it, she thought solemnly, feeling incredibly despondent.

“Can I come in?” came a voice from behind her, and she turned so suddenly that she thought she heard every vertebra in her spinal column pop. Harry was standing in the doorway.

“You shouldn’t be out of the bed,” she reprimanded him half-heartedly, trying to ignore how nervous and jumpy his mere presence made her. She didn’t understand why things had changed so fast. Is it because I admitted it to myself? Or because Ron and I broke up? Or is it just the way he’s looking at me... right now? Dammit!

“I’m fine,” his voice was flat, dismissive of her concerns, and his green gaze was intent on her face. She felt her cheeks growing hot. “Hermione, I – ”

Desperate for something to do, she groped in the bag and pulled out the first wand that her fingers came in contact with. She did so with an expansive, reckless gesture, and saw Harry flinch as the untested wand swept in front of him in a wide arc

“Sorry,” she mumbled, embarrassed, and turned the wand toward the empty corner, giving it an experimental swish and flick. What looked a little like soap suds frothed from the tip of the wand and dripped

listlessly onto the floor. Hermione and Harry both looked at the viscous liquid with a measure of disgust, and Hermione discarded the wand on the mattress behind her, pulling out another one. This one was longer and more tapered than the first, and blasted a hole in the far wall, which thankfully, enclosed a closet. Plaster dust flew up in a small poof, and Harry coughed.

“Hermione – ” Harry tried to say, sitting down on the bed, on the opposite side from her. Hermione pulled out a third wand, her eyes taking on that manic Hermione-gleam. The third wand rattled the window noisily in its pane and rumbled through the planks of the floor. “Hermione – ” he said again, as her hand delved back into the bag. Lightning-quick, he reached over and grabbed her wrist. “Hermione, stop!” he finally managed to get out, and they sat motionless for a moment, staring at each other.

“I’m just trying to find out which wand – ” she began, protesting innocently.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Harry said cryptically, and Hermione knew that he wasn’t talking about wands.

“Harry – ” she said hastily, but Harry cut her off again.

“What’s wrong with you and Ron?”

“What makes you think there’s something wrong?” Hermione said, lowering her eyebrows at him quizzically, but her voice was high and false. She tried a fourth wand, which simply did nothing at all. Harry continued to gaze at her with a don’t try to fool me expression. The fifth wand sent such a power surge around the room that the lamplight brightened and dimmed, and Hermione could almost feel her hair stand on end. The light out in the corridor blew out. Harry was evidently prepared to sit there and watch her all night. She picked up another wand.

“We broke up,” she blurted suddenly, not looking at him.

“Why?” he asked in a bewildered voice that somehow set her teeth on edge. Could he really be so clueless?

"It wasn't going anywhere," she said in an airy, casual way that still failed to fool him. The sixth wand sent a stream of fire toward the wall that ignited the curtains. They both shot to their feet, exchanging looks of alarm and helplessness.

"Here," Harry said suddenly, withdrawing his wand from his back pocket. "You left this in the infirmary. Remus gave it back to me. I don't really know why."

"Harry, your wand doesn't work that well for me," she protested. The flames had climbed the linen panel like ivy on a trellis, and the valance was now on fire.

"You'd rather beat the fire out with your hands?" Harry asked sarcastically, looking around at the mattresses, which had no bedding on them as yet. Throwing him a frustrated look, she grabbed the wand from his hands and cast *Aguamenti*. It took three attempts before a sufficient enough stream of water was created to put out the small blaze. The smoke was making both of them cough, and the curtains now hung from the window in drippy, gray, tattered shreds. Harry moved to the window, and opened it, allowing a delightful fresh breeze to circulate around the room.

"Thanks," Hermione said, handing the wand back to Harry. She picked out a seventh wand from the bag, looking at it rather warily.

"So, it wasn't going anywhere?" Harry said, picking up the thread of their conversation from before she'd set the room afire.

"Harry!" Hermione protested, her tone clearly saying that she didn't want to talk about it. She looked at him sideways, and noted his pallor and the sooty circles beneath his eyes that had nothing to do with the recent fire. "You should be in bed," she said, in the same tone in which she would have commented on a need to complete an essay or study for an exam.

"You can't just send me to bed because you don't want to answer my question," he noted wryly. She tried the seventh wand, in an attempt to avoid the conversation. A soft wind rustled around the room,

sweeping the remainder of the smoky smell away, and a note of music sounded, low and vibrant.

“Wow,” Hermione breathed, reverently, holding the slender, delicately carved vine wood wand in one open palm.

“I think you’ve found your wand,” Harry remarked, looking not at the wand in question, but at her. Her fingers closed around the wand and she folded her arm, bringing the wand in close to her chest.

“At what price?” she asked, thinking of Mr. Weasley’s frail, scarred form in the bed down the hall.

“At least you’re needed,” Harry said miserably, looking balefully at his wand, as if he’d like to snap it in half and hurl both pieces across the room. Hermione gave him a reproachful look.

“Harry – ” she began to say, in a don’t be ridiculous tone.

“Be realistic, Hermione!” he snapped, and she was brought back to their conversation in the attic not too long ago. “You can’t pretend I’m useful just because you – just because I – we’re friends.” He began ticking points off on his fingers. “I can’t fight because I’ve no magic. I can’t leave because you would all still be here fighting for your lives, and I could never escape that or forget that. I can’t even – I can’t even – ” he stopped for a moment, his breathing harsh and uneven, and then finished his sentence. “I can’t even die.”

Hermione went perfectly still, wand still at her chest, and looked at him with round, shocked eyes.

“Harry!” she whispered, and he looked abashed that he’d unburdened himself on her.

“I’ve – I’ve thought about it,” he admitted softly, and appeared stricken when her eyes slowly brimmed with tears. “But – but as long as I’m alive – as long as Voldemort’s looking for me, then that’s – then that’s one more moment that some of his concentration is on me, instead of on killing someone else.”

"I need you," Hermione murmured, referring back to his previous statement. Harry looked up at her suddenly, green eyes ablaze, as if that was not what he had expected to hear.

"Hermione, you're so – you're so strong and brave and – and brilliant. You don't need me. I don't think you need anybody." He was smiling a little, and Hermione knew he meant it as a compliment, but it still stung. I needed you. Why hasn't that ever been enough? Ron's words resounded aching in her ears.

"It's a façade, Harry," Hermione said, with a watery smile. "The past few days I've never been so terrified and broken and lost. You saw me upstairs. And there's no valiance in being buried behind a book. You think I'm strong? And brave? If I am, it's because you give me strength and courage. When I look at you and think about everything you've been through, knowing that somehow that your sense of honor and nobility and your strength of character have remained intact, it – it gives me – you give me – hope. It makes me realize that maybe the future is – will be a good one, a strong and honorable one – sometimes I'm hoping for it, in spite of all this, in spite of myself." Harry appeared mesmerized by her words.

"Even now?" he asked.

"Yes," Hermione nodded, her heart in her eyes. "Even now. Especially now."

He was looking at her avidly, his eyes moving as they flitted over the features of her face. She saw the yellowish, puffy places that were partially healed bruises. The hemorrhage in his eye was smaller, but still present, and there was a nasty split in his lip that had not fully healed. He had new glasses on, and his hair was shiny and clean. He needs a haircut, she thought almost maternally. He appeared torn, a smile trying to play across his lips, but the dark shadows of what he had gone through still murky in the otherwise brilliant green of his eyes.

They were sitting on the bed, their legs hanging over opposite sides, but their torsos nearly lined up in the middle. Harry was leaning back

on his good arm. Hermione's eyes wandered absently down to his still splinted fingers.

"I think," Harry said, in a low, hesitant voice, "that that's the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." Hermione's cheeks flamed, and suddenly his face seemed very close to hers.

"I'm sure," she whispered faintly, trying to sound casual, "that Cho – or Ginny – have said loads of nicer things to you than that." He shook his head deliberately, his eyes never leaving hers, and Hermione wondered if it was normal to feel so skittish and antsy – or like something skittish and antsy had taken up residence somewhere in her abdominal region.

"No," he replied, and his hand was on top of hers. "Do you feel it?"

"Feel – feel what?" she stammered, even though she knew what he meant. She wanted to cry – the entire situation was ludicrous. They were losing a war; he'd been stripped of his magic and had a warrant on his head; she had just broken up with their other best friend; they had lost dozens of people they knew in one day. Then why is this stupid smile on my face, she wondered. All her arguments with Ron against this type of thing applied here as well; she had never doubted their validity and truthfulness.

Except I wasn't in love with Ron, she finally told herself, and found herself returning Harry's gaze with an intense one of her own.

She wasn't sure who moved first. All she knew is that Harry's lips had just barely brushed hers, when the door clattered open. Hermione started violently enough to knock the discarded wands off the bed, where they landed noisily and rolled to various and random positions in the room.

Neville was standing in the doorway, looking mortified.

"I'm – I'm sorry. I was – Remus said Harry should – " he stammered, his face about as red as Hermione imagined hers to be. Harry was facing away from her, but she could see the red stain on his neck and ears as well.

“No,” Hermione sprang up and hastened to speak, “no, we weren’t – there was nothing going on. I was trying out the wands, and – ” Neville looked as if he just wanted desperately to leave, though Hermione could have sworn that something like amusement glinted deep in his eyes. “You aren’t going to say anything, are you?” she said with quiet desperation, flinging away all pretense, and drawing a visibly surprised reaction from Harry.

“It’s not any of my business,” Neville mumbled, his eyes fixed somewhere over her right shoulder. He started to edge toward the door.

“Don’t leave,” Hermione said, in her best hospitable voice. “I was just – I was going. I need to show them my new wand, anyway. Ron would probably like to – ” She flung one last helpless look at Harry, and fled for only the second time that day.

TBC

Well, I hope you liked this chapter. Not a whole lot happened, but there was some important dialogue, and a couple of subtle plot threads that will be seen more later on. I wasn’t really sure about this chapter myself.

As always, thanks to those few who review!

Lorien

Chapter Eight: Awakening

Penelope Clearwater was the mediwitch that Professor McGonagall had been talking about. Fred had seen her during their mission to St. Mungo's, but had not recognized Penelope beneath the traditional twisty cap. She stood in the middle of the War Room, faced with the somewhat blank gazes of the younger Order members, twisting her hands around each other nervously. Hermione felt a little sorry for her; she was standing in front of them, an unintentional reminder of a prodigal son, who had never gotten the chance to return to the family fold. Ron and Fred were watching her with cool expressions, as if observing her under a microscope.

"Minerva," Tonks spoke neutrally, carefully selecting her words. Her glance drifted to Remus, knowing he had to have given McGonagall some kind of signed documentation for Penelope to have even been able to enter the house. Lupin shifted uneasily in his chair. "You know we have to be very careful to whom this house is revealed." Even now, as they were working on networking with two other safehouses, exact locations still remained unknown. Professor McGonagall met Tonks' gaze head on, and Penelope looked from one to the other, stricken and anxious.

"I've always had confidence in Minerva's judgment," Remus said, even so looking somewhat uncertainly at Penelope. "I did not know who the mediwitch was, only that Minerva felt she could be trusted."

"Miss Clearwater was Head Girl, Nymphadora," McGonagall pointed out calmly. "I had no reason to distrust her then, and I see no reason to distrust her now."

"She's been working at St. Mungo's," Tonks countered. "A place now controlled by Death Eaters. Why is she still there? If the Death Eaters became aware of her former affiliation with Percy Weasley, maybe they've been hoping she would lead them to some of us." Hermione felt Harry start a little in the chair next to hers, and deduced that he had actually not thought of that.

"Please," Penelope broke in, before McGonagall could answer Tonks. "I – I – the Death Eaters needed mediwitches and healers. When –

when they came – I – I didn't know what to do. Many of them were injured, so – so I just – I stayed at work, kept coming to work, like I always did. Every day, more of the staff went missing. Whether they were – were removed, or left on their own, I have no idea, but – but I didn't know what else to do. Everything had changed so fast."

"You've been helping save Death Eaters' lives!" Fred said, glaring at her, and Hermione could tell he was thinking of George. Penelope's face crumpled, and Hermione's own expression must have softened, for she felt Ron nudge her from where he sat on her other side, looking at her with an oh no, you don't warning shake of his head.

"I know!" Penelope cried, holding up two placating hands. "I realized that, and I – I knew I couldn't do it anymore – especially after they – they took out the Long-Term Care ward. Those people never hurt anybody, would never hurt anybody, and – " Hermione's eyes flickered around the room, reflexively, looking for Neville, but she realized that he was not in the room. He must be up in the infirmary with Ginny, she thought. He had been spending a lot of his time there, and often helped with the more basic tasks of Ginny's care, like changing the bed linens or dosing her with the nutrient potion that kept her alive. "I've never been so glad to see a friendly face in my life," Penelope finished, smiling gratefully at Professor McGonagall.

"What about Percy?" Lupin asked evenly, chewing the end of a quill. Hermione could feel the tension in the room ratchet up a few notches, with Ron and Fred becoming instantly watchful. Mr. Weasley grew alert as well, from his position cosseted in a cushy chair, the vivid pink slashes having faded to nearly invisible. He had lost some of the range of motion in his shoulders from the scarring, but had made as good a recovery as could have been expected. He watched Penelope avidly, as if she might give away information on his son by some gesture or flicker of her eyes. Penelope shook her head, and glanced quickly at Mr. Weasley, her expression apologetic. Hermione saw the older man slump every so slightly.

"I'm – I'm sorry," she said, and her hands were clasped beseechingly. "I – Percy and I – I haven't talked to him in months, not since we broke up. He was always so busy, and– " Fred snorted, and mumbled something unintelligible under his breath. "He hasn't had any contact

with me. I don't think the Death Eaters know that we – knew that we were—" Her eyes filled with tears, as she stumbled to a clumsy halt.

Hermione let out a small sigh. She may not have agreed with Percy's actions against his family, but she understood his motivations. She thought that she had more in common with Percy than any of the other Weasleys. But she knew – or had had Harry and Ron to show her – when to discard the rules. Percy had had no such luxury – or had been more resistant to change – and had clung to the rules, the status quo, public opinion, even as they all sank beneath him. She sighed again. She understood Percy, could have been Percy, if not for...

She felt his fingers twiddling next to hers, the side of his hand brushing the side of hers in that nonchalant, oops-didn't-mean-to-touch-you kind of way. She tucked her lip between her teeth, and could not look at him, as his ever so slight touch sent chills up her arm and heat into her face. She nudged him gently in side, ever mindful of his just-healed ribs. Stop it. We're supposed to be paying attention! His fingers withdrew, and she instantly missed them, marveling that it had only been three days since Neville interrupted their just-barely kiss in the bedroom. There had been much time spent hunched around the wireless, or moving pins around on the maps that lined the walls. Some of the Order had gone out on fact-finding or supply-gathering missions. Hermione herself had accompanied Ron and Fred into four of the closest Muggle villages, disguised of course, to determine if there had been any unusual activity there lately. There had simply been no opportunity in the last three days to discuss what had almost happened – or to repeat it.

A couple of times, Hermione had wondered if it had even happened. More than once, she wondered if the sudden revelations of feelings had spooked both of them like nervous horses. Most of the time, though, she felt the tension and anticipation pooling in her stomach like molten metal, longing for – craving – their next moment.

Harry's knee hit hers casually, and she felt him shift a little in the chair next to her, angling himself so he could watch her without being noticed. She saw Luna's vague blue gaze drift over them lazily, neither stopping nor looking interested in any way, and wondered if

Luna could sense the simmering something between herself and Harry. Those dreamy blue eyes concealed much more than they revealed, Hermione was sure. Harry was leaning back in his chair, with his arm across the back of her chair. He was not touching her, but Hermione could feel the warmth of his nearness as if he were radiating heat.

She blinked her eyes deliberately, as if trying to focus, and leaned forward, elbows on knees. Professor McGonagall was speaking.

"I believe that we are placing undue focus on the wrong Weasley," she said firmly, with an apologetic glance at the family's patriarch. "It is not for anything relating to Percy Weasley, but rather Ginny Weasley, that I decided to bring Miss Clearwater here." Hermione felt the boys on either side of her tense, and Harry's casual touching games were forgotten by both of them.

"You said her status hadn't changed," Ron said, in a tone that nearly sounded accusing.

"It had not, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall said sympathetically, "until this morning. I obtained Remus's letter, and departed for St. Mungo's as soon as I noted the new behaviors."

"I – I – she seemed to be resting as always," Mr. Weasley stammered, looking at McGonagall with eyes that begged to be told that his daughter was all right.

"She's started to move," McGonagall said shortly, watching Arthur with stricken eyes. Most of the room did a double take, jerking their collective gazes up to stare at McGonagall in surprise.

"She's – she's waking up?" Fred asked, with a hopeful tone in his voice. The former professor pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"I didn't say that, Mr. Weasley. I said that she's starting to move. Mr. Longbottom noted it first this morning, and I saw it as well. One hand was twitching, she was trying to cry out, and her eyes were moving, while closed, almost as if she were dreaming. Given the unknown

nature of the curse that hit her, I thought that there was no time to lose. Also, while I can perform field medicine adequately, as a stop-gap method, I have not been trained sufficiently to be able to help to the fullest capacity. Miss Clearwater has, and was at the top of her training class, I believe. I've described Miss Weasley's case to her, and she was able to collect some things and bring them with her from St. Mungo's."

Penelope's eyes danced over the worried, tense, suspicious, haggard faces in the War Room.

"Could I see her now, Professor?" she asked, with a quiet dignity that Hermione instinctively liked. She watched Professor McGonagall touch Penelope lightly on the shoulder, and show her the staircase leading up.

"Right this way, Miss Clearwater," she said, and nodded to the rest of the Order. "If you'll excuse me..." Ron and Fred stood up hastily, scraping their wooden chairs loudly across the floor, their belligerent stances making it clear that they weren't letting the former Ravenclaw anywhere near their sister without their watchful attendance. Hermione thought that McGonagall was resisting the urge to roll her eyes. Mr. Weasley sat in his chair, looking fatigued, and seemed to be content to let his sons monitor the situation. Hermione's eyes misted, as she watched him, and unconsciously, her hand went to her wand, feeling the delicately etched patina of wood beneath her fingers. She shifted in her chair, and appeared to be preparing to stand, as Remus and Tonks followed the others up the stairs.

"Hermione?" came a voice in her ear, so suddenly that Hermione jumped, turning to find Harry's face very close to hers. She recoiled from him instinctively, her face burning, and replied shakily,

"What?" Her voice came out with more asperity than she meant for it to. He looked hesitant, and she felt terrible.

"I thought – I wanted – wondered ... if we could talk? Outside maybe?" There was a lovely little patio out behind the house, from which one had the vista of rocky shores dropping steeply into the ocean. Nearby was a newly tilled plot of ground, where they intended

to plant a garden – magically enhanced and protected, of course – in case it became too difficult or dangerous to obtain supplies elsewhere.

“Sure, Harry,” she replied quietly, barely able to hear her own voice above the surge of blood pounding in her ears. As she stood, she caught sight of Mr. Weasley again, and froze, looking torn. “Mr. Weasley, do you need us to – ?” she began, but Luna interrupted her. Hermione looked over with mild irritation, having forgotten that the blond was even in the room.

“I’ll stay with him, in case he needs anything,” she said in her blandest, dreamiest voice. Hermione flashed her a grateful look, as they exited, intensely aware of Harry’s hand lightly resting on the small of her back.

The breeze was whipping in from the ocean vigorously, tossing Hermione’s curls around haphazardly, and ruffling Harry’s interminably messy hair. The sun was warm, and only a few clouds scudded across the sky. A beautiful day, Hermione mused, realizing with some astonishment that June had faded into July without her noticing. Not faded, she corrected, but exploded or collapsed, or whatever calamitous word would be more appropriate.

She darted an uncertain glance at Harry, who misinterpreted the anxiety in her eyes.

“If you’d rather not...” he said, hesitantly, somehow looking as fragile and breakable as spun glass. She melted instantly.

“Harry, I would like nothing more than to figure out just what the hell is going on with us,” she said matter of factly. Harry looked over his shoulder again, the windows set into the house, which rather reminded one of interested, prying eyes.

“Could you – ?” he said, his face tinting red at even having to ask. Having to request people to do magic for him had not been easy, and he continued to struggle with the amount of humility it required from him. Maybe Snape was right and I really am as arrogant as he thought my father was, was something he’d said to her once, when she found him painstakingly levering a large rock out of the area

they'd set aside for a garden, rather than asking someone to levitate it out of the way. He seemed stubbornly determined to at least attempt to pull his own weight, and had also taken up a majority of the cooking, something he'd become rather good at, due to his sojourn at the Dursleys'.

"Caecusco," Hermione said, without Harry having to say anything further. He looked at her with some measure of surprise, and she shrugged a little diffidently. "It's a new one."

"Figures," he said, casting an admiring look at her. She blushed a little.

"Anyone looking at us will just see an empty patio. I can't figure out how to get it to move, say if someone's running, so it's not much use tactically, but..." She trailed off into the deepening silence, broken only by the rush of waves and wind, and the mournful cries of shorebirds. Now that he was alone with her, facing her, he appeared to be at a loss regarding what to say.

"I'm – I've – " he started and then looked at her. She sat down, legs folded over each other, basking in the warmth of the gray stone of the patio, arms folded over her knees, and her eyebrows raised in expectation. "I've been trying to convince myself for three weeks that I'm not in love with you," he blurted very suddenly and comically, looking almost surprised at himself for saying it.

"Three – three weeks?" she stammered, looking nonplussed.

"Since graduation..." he said, and then paused, adding thoughtfully, "Actually, I think it's been more like a year, but I didn't realize what it was until three weeks ago."

"Even while Ron and – ?" she asked, and Harry looked ashamed of himself.

"I wasn't ever going to say anything," he said, hastening to reassure her, and she smiled at him. "I wouldn't have – I'm – I'm still not sure I should be saying anything..." Hermione expected that her face

mirrored his. Her heart acted as if it intended to beat a path to freedom out of her chest.

“So how did you do? At convincing yourself, I mean.” The look he gave her then was nearly enough to send Hermione into laughter, but she wisely realized that laughing might be the worst possible thing she could do at that moment. Something glittered in his eyes, and Hermione thought that perhaps her own inclinations weren’t as secret as she’d thought.

“I’m afraid I failed miserably,” he said, after a beat, sitting down beside her on the patio, facing the opposite direction. Hermione’s hands were trembling, and she clasped them together tightly, trying to conceal it. “I know that the timing is horrid, I know that I have nothing – less than nothing, even – to offer you, I know that we’re both in mortal peril, I know that our best friend is going to absolutely hate this, and – and I know that there are a million reasons why we should not even consider this.” Hermione tilted large, luminous eyes toward him, and felt electricity shoot from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

“But?” she prodded, hoping that her voice at least sounded steady. She wanted to stand back up, to be able to pace the length and breadth of the patio, as she was wont to do, but something in his magnetic gaze held her still.

“But I don’t care.” Hermione felt her world tilt dizzily, and she knew she wouldn’t have been capable of standing at all. Those four words shot straight to her core, and she wasn’t sure if she was going to melt or explode. He leaned closer to her, and gently took both of her hands in both of his. Hermione felt dizzy with euphoria. Who would have even imagined that the touch of his fingers on hers could send such thrills of desire racing up her arm and spreading throughout her body? Who would have thought that something so new and nebulous and unformed could even hope to survive and thrive in such a stunted environment as that in which they now found themselves? His eyes were still fastened on her face. “I know this is stupid, this is completely stupid. It’s irresponsible for me to even be telling you this, Hermione,” he murmured, and she looked up to see the flicker of uncertainty in the depths of his gaze.

"I've loved you for a long time, Harry, in spite of myself, even when I thought it was hopeless," she admitted simply, cutting him off, and he needed no other answer. "I think everyone was right, you know – about Bill and Fleur, and Professor Lupin and Tonks. There's little enough happiness in the world right now; maybe we could all do with a little more. We aren't guaranteed tomorrow. Bill wasn't. Don't you think Fleur is glad that she had the time she had with Bill? Whatever happens, I'll be grateful for what we got to share." Her eyes misted a little; she cast them down, and then looked up at him through the fringe of her lashes. She felt, rather than heard, him catch his breath. Then his fingers were beneath her chin, lifting her face to his, and then his lips were on hers.

And she was utterly lost. Practical Hermione was squelched with a vehemence that surprised her. She couldn't tell where she left off and Harry began. She felt like she'd be willing to cast away an entire future full of consequences for the ultimate beauty and perfection that was this moment. The entire wizarding world could just go to hell...

Finally, breathless, they both broke apart, gasping for air, and resting their foreheads together. Harry's hands were at her jawline, cupping her face, fingers threading into her hair.

"Harry, I – " she started to say, but was interrupted by sudden shouting and clamor from the house. They sprang away from each other, as Remus came to the back door, and looked briefly and rather frantically around for them. When he did not see them, he withdrew back into the house, but they were already exchanging alarmed glances and bolting for the door.

As they wrenched it open and plunged back inside, Fred, Ron, and Minerva McGonagall were rapidly descending the stairs, while Remus and Tonks already stood anxiously in the War Room. Luna was no longer sitting, but was standing just outside the room at the foot of the stairs, and it had been she, Hermione assumed, who had called everyone.

"Turn the Wireless up," Remus ordered, seeing Harry and Hermione hovering anxiously in the War Room doorway. Tonks was the closest,

and immediately went to do so, while everyone piled into the room behind them.

“What’s going on?” she heard Harry’s concerned voice.

“The Wireless is working again,” Luna said, her eyes, for once, appearing clear and sharp.

The Wireless tended to be nothing but dead air, which didn’t really surprise anyone. The service had been sporadic at best, reports from people on the run or in hiding, like they were, who could broadcast for only a short time before being traced and pursued. But recently, Voldemort had been using the airwaves himself, spewing forth foul propaganda, vilifying everyone from Muggles, to the magical offspring of Muggles, from the Fighters for the Light in general, to Harry Potter in particular.

They had been surprised when Voldemort had first mentioned Harry’s elusion of his clutches on the public airwaves. Remus had commented that he’d expected the Dark Lord to deny it, thinking that the admission that Harry had escaped would denote a weakness on his part.

Instead, the new ruler of the entire British wizarding world had gloried in it, depicting himself as an innocent victim of Harry’s machinations, citing Harry’s ruthless, single-minded escape attempt, in which he killed four people. Hermione recalled wondering if Voldemort was referring to the four Muggles that he himself had killed, parading them before Harry one by one, disguised as his best friend. He referenced Harry’s support for – or rather, lack of prejudice against – Muggles, wondering why he would defend those who had burned wizards and witches at the stake not that long ago.

“He’s trying to divide us, keep us squabbling amongst ourselves, rather than partaking of a new order, an order in which leadership falls to those who to whom it rightfully belongs, those elite who are capable of so much more than mere Muggles could ever dream! He must be stopped, and those who are so misguided to harbor and protect him will be ground into dust under our feet, as we work to achieve our ultimate goal!”

At first, Hermione could not believe that anyone would fall for such blatant bias, but Harry's prior words sprang to her mind. I've seen how fast the wizarding world can turn on a person. They'll wish they'd turned me over to Voldemort when they had a chance. Her fear for Harry had spiraled to new heights. Could some regular, everyday wizard be the one incited to hunt Harry down and turn him in, falsely believing it to be in the wizarding world's best interests? We can't fight everyone in Britain, Hermione remembered thinking glumly.

As Tonks twisted the knob, the low murmur in the rear of the room that must have initially caught Luna's attention became a clear, distinct voice. It was not the high, half-mad voice of Lord Voldemort, but the precise, cultured tones of a practiced speaker.

"First High Lord Voldemort, Minister of Magic, Heir of Salazar Slytherin, and Supreme Master of the Wizarding World has an important announcement."

"Arrogant git," Fred muttered, under his breath. Then came the snaky, shrill tones they all recognized.

"I wish to announce an upcoming event, which will be held to celebrate our illustrious and decisive victory over those who would water down the magical power of wizardkind with the befouled and impure blood of Muggles – "

"Yeah, like you?" Ron snorted angrily.

"Shhh!" said Hermione.

"Our victory is unprecedented and complete. Only a few remain who are foolish enough to resist us, and their fates have already been sealed by their own hands. Some of these idealistic and stubborn fools have been apprehended, and will be executed at the rally. Their deaths will state clearly and loudly that the new order is firmly in control and cannot be overturned!" His voice crescendoed through the end of that sentence. The Order members looked at each other anxiously. To whom was Voldemort referring? "The rally will take place in front of the Ministry building on – "

"July 31," Harry said dully, startling them by speaking in perfect unison with the Wireless. His eyes were blank and sad, and to Hermione, he now appeared very different from the smiling boy who had kissed her in the sunlight, with fingers of wind in their hair.

"Oh, Harry," she said, in a muted whisper, reaching for his hand without even thinking about it. His fingers were icy cold, and when her skin touched his, he stiffened suddenly, grinding out a groan between gritted teeth. His knees buckled, and he grabbed for a chair in an effort to stay upright. His other hand flew up to his scar.

"He's going to kill them!" he said suddenly, in a hoarse, wild voice that did not at all sound like his. "He's going to kill them all!"

"Who, Harry?" Hermione said, positioning herself in front of his face, trying to get him to look into her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Little Hangleton, Godric's Hollow, Ottery St. Catchpole, Little Whinging..." Harry began to recite a virtual atlas of names, starting with ones that were obviously significant to Voldemort, but continuing to random whimsical English village names. Hermione lost count after eighteen such places were listed.

"Muggle villages?" Ron asked, his eyes fixed on his friend's staring face. Hermione nodded bleakly.

"He wants to draw Harry out," Remus said suddenly, looking as weathered and old as the worn face of an ancient building. His appearance worried Hermione, since he still had over a week until the time of the full moon, but the look in his eyes told her that his weariness stemmed only from his concern for James' son. "His loss of Harry bothers him more than he lets anyone realize. It rankles him, eats at him, consumes him. It's all he can think about."

"How – how did he know all that – all that just now?" Ron asked curiously, still watching Harry, as if he had not heard Remus at all. Harry jumped a little, and seemed to have returned from whatever faraway place he had visited.

“Did you feel Voldemort in your mind?” Tonks asked, sounding concerned. Harry shook his head, tiredly. Hermione had dropped his hand, but was still standing quite near him, watching him with compassionate eyes.

“I didn’t really feel him. I just – I just knew. Like there was a list of those places in my head.”

“How is that even possible? If Harry doesn’t have any more magic – ?” Ron began.

“Even Muggles have been known to have telepathic abilities from time to time,” Fred pointed out.

“Can Voldemort determine the location of the safehouse from Harry’s mind?” Tonks asked, and Remus was shaking his head before she even finished her question.

“I don’t see how. As the Secret Keeper, only I could give it away.”

“But if Harry has no magic, then he can’t do Occlumency to block Voldemort out,” Fred put in. Hermione felt the quiet tension radiating from Harry, an instant before it manifested itself.

“I am standing right here!” He shouted suddenly, causing everyone in the room to exchange shamefaced glances. There were several embarrassed apologies proffered, but Harry waved them away.

“What happens if I turn myself in?” he asked suddenly, and Hermione sucked in air audibly.

“Harry, what are you trying to say?” Remus asked, looking bewildered and worried.

“I’m not trying to say anything. I’m asking a perfectly clear question. If I turn myself in to Voldemort, what do you think he’d do next?”

“Harry, no!” It was a low, broken murmur from Hermione, who slipped her hand back into his. Color ran high in her cheeks like a defiant

banner, as Ron's eyes flicked from Harry's face down to their joined hands and up to Hermione's face.

"He's going to kill you, Harry," Tonks finally said, after the silence in the room had stretched nearly to the breaking point. "He's been waiting to kill you for 18 years, since before you were born. You've managed to make him fail how many times now? It's gone beyond the wording of a prophecy. Now it's personal, Harry."

"What – what about the people he has? If I gave myself up, would he let them go? Would he spare the villages? If he's only doing it to draw me out, as you said?" Harry looked at Remus, who shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot.

"Harry, this is Voldemort you're talking about." It was Hermione who spoke, not Remus. "He might say anything to get you, but he won't mean it. Promises, honor – it all means nothing to him. Your death is not going to turn him into a benevolent leader. It will merely open the floodgates of hell, once the last obstacle on his path to power is removed!" Her words rang passionately into the room, but Harry rounded on her, almost angrily.

"What obstacle? I'm no obstacle to anyone! He saw to that himself. Tonks is right. It's personal now. He doesn't need to kill me; he wants to kill me so he can say he did. Why not just give him what he wants?"

"But – but Harry – upstairs, that day, you said – " Hermione tried, speaking in a quiet voice, as if he were the only other person in the room with her. He knew to what she was referring. I can't even die. He met her gaze head-on, and said softly,

"Maybe I was wrong. If he's willing to kill so many – just to get to me – why do I deserve to live more than the thousands of Muggles that he plans to murder?"

"But, mate, the prophecy – " Ron said, as if he wanted to somehow intercede in this highly charged moment between Harry and Hermione that he didn't quite understand.

“The prophecy is rot, Ron!” Harry replied hotly. “Voldemort could live quite happily without me being any kind of hindrance to him! I’m no match for him now – if I ever was. Don’t any of you get it? There’s nothing I can do anymore!” He sighed and his shoulders slumped. Hermione’s hand was still twined tightly with his. “But maybe I could save those Muggles.”

“I’d like to have Miss Clearwater look at you, Mr. Potter,” McGonagall spoke up suddenly, having been silent throughout this entire discussion, while evidently thinking furiously. Harry glanced at her almost sullenly, the unspoken whatever for? stamped clearly on his face. “Now this is just a theory, but if you are still getting information from Voldemort, then it suggests that your magical structure – the genetic differences that make you magical, rather than Muggle – is still intact. Voldemort’s magic causes the information to be transferred. And – ” Harry and Ron were still staring blankly at her, but there were calculating looks on the faces of the others, as they tried to pin down exactly what the professor was saying. It was Hermione who came up with it first.

“Harry can’t transfer any information to Voldemort because he has no magic to facilitate the exchange!” she exclaimed. “It’s like a one-way street. Professor, if his magical structure is still functional, do you think that means – ?” she asked.

“I think it could, Miss Granger,” McGonagall replied.

“Will somebody please tell me what is going on – in complete sentences?” Harry ground out in total frustration. By way of answer, Hermione began to shuffle him toward the infirmary, chattering rapidly in his ear the entire time.

“If what makes you magical is still intact, then that means all that’s missing is the actual magic flowing through you.”

“Oh, is that all?” Harry said sarcastically, but Hermione ignored him.

“It’s like a car with no petrol. Or – or a battery without a charge. All that’s needed is the fuel, and the object in question will work perfectly again. Just like it worked perfectly when Voldemort’s magic flowed

from him to you through your scar. I don't think Voldemort intended for that to happen – or even knew that it could – but you still saw those village names, didn't you?"

Harry struggled to keep his face impassive, though he could not keep a glint of hope from lighting briefly within his eyes.

"Magic would be a lot harder to come by, wouldn't it?" he said flatly. Hermione's eyebrows scrunched down low and flat over her sharp eyes.

"Yes, I must admit, I don't know exactly how we'd get – I mean, there's not exactly a surplus of spare magic lying about, is there?"

When they arrived at the top of the stairs, they almost collided with Penelope Clearwater, who was wringing her hands nervously.

"Penelope, what on earth is the matter?" Hermione asked, concern lacing her voice.

"It's Ginny," she said. "She's waking up."

Most of the Order sat in the hallway outside the infirmary, waiting for news of Ginny. McGonagall had entered to assist Penelope, and Neville had been summarily ejected, although the remaining Weasleys were allowed in.

"She's already been through a lot, and there's so much more she's going to have to deal with, now that she's awake. This is probably not going to be pleasant, and she doesn't need all of you hovering over her," McGonagall had said, politely, but firmly, as she closed the door in all of their faces.

And so they were sitting. Remus and Tonks were sitting at the top of the stairs, almost exactly where Hermione had seen her after Mr. Weasley had been injured. Remus was leaning against the wall, looking peaked, and Tonks was leaning against him. They were silent. Neville and Luna sat in the hallway on opposite sides, their feet toward each other. Neville, in particular, looked edgy and worried. Luna leaned her head back against the wall, picking absently at a

loose thread on her sleeve without looking, her eyes instead tracing a crack in the ceiling plaster.

Harry and Hermione sat farther down, on the far side of the infirmary door, side by side, their bent knees concealing the fact that they were holding hands again. They were whispering quietly together, but it wasn't the inconsequential small talk of lovers.

"You're a realist, Hermione – in – in most things," he added, thinking of S.P.E.W. "You've got to realize that there's no way to 'replace' magic in someone that's had it drained from them."

"You don't know that, Harry. What Voldemort's done to you is rare, and even attempting to reverse it is rarer still. You can't say it won't work, because we haven't tried yet."

"And just where are you going to get the spare magic?" Harry raised his eyebrows sarcastically, and for a moment, Hermione couldn't stand him. She didn't like this caustic, bitter, coolly mocking Harry. She never had, any of the times he had manifested himself. "You said yourself there wasn't any lying about."

"Of course there's not going to be any tied up in a flour sack somewhere!" she hissed, feeling herself grow annoyed. "But there are plenty of people around with magic in them."

"You're going to mug a Death Eater for his magic?" Harry said, apparently keen on mocking this idea as well, but something about it gave him pause. "You know – actually, that's not a bad idea."

"Oh, Harry!" Hermione's forehead creased, and she looked more sorrowful than angry. "It doesn't work that way. We can't just take someone's magic."

"Voldemort did!" Harry interposed quickly.

"Well, I mean, you can. But that's – that's Dark magic. We don't know how to do it – we could – we could kill you in the process. And we – we just shouldn't do that. It – it's – " She stumbled to a stop, begging him with her eyes to understand.

"It's what keeps us from becoming Death Eaters," Harry finished for her, speaking in a dull, disappointed voice. They lapsed into silence, Hermione rubbing her thumb gently against his.

"It doesn't mean there's no hope, Harry," she ventured, after a moment. "There could still be a way – if – if a willing transfer were to occur, then – " Harry scoffed at the notion before she could finish.

"Willing? Who in their right mind would voluntarily give up their magic to – " He turned sharply to look at her, awareness dawning in his eyes. She tried vainly not to look guilty. "No, Hermione. Not gonna happen. You will not give up your magic for me. I – I won't allow it." There was a rebellious flash in Hermione's eyes, and she briefly considered taking him to task for his high-handed attitude, but this was neither the time nor place for it.

"Have you even considered – ?" she began, but he held up one hand, cutting her off.

"No! I won't consider it. It has never entered my head. And you'll be wasting your time, if you continue to pursue this, because I won't be any part of it."

"Harry, if you're – if there's really something special that – if you're really destined to defeat Voldemort, then – then this could be everyone's only hope. If you're really the Chosen One, like everyone said, then – "

"I'm not destined to defeat him," Harry corrected wearily. "Just destined to fight him," he paused to think for a moment, then added, "Maybe not even that anymore. Maybe the only part of the prophecy that still applies is the bit about being killed."

"Harry, stop it!" Hermione had gone back to angry again, and she saw the confusion on Harry's face. Inwardly, she cursed herself. Why had she picked now to acknowledge love? It wasn't causing her anything but complete emotional turmoil. "If I can talk to McGonagall, maybe we can – "

“You’d be wasting your breath!” Harry said, in an implacably stubborn voice. “Has it ever occurred to you, Hermione, that you’re more important to me than anything, even my own life? That I may have been dubbed the Chosen One, but you’re the one that I chose, that I love.” His voice was so low that she could barely hear it. “If anything happens to you, I couldn’t – I couldn’t live with myself.” The words were such an eerie echo of what Ron had said in the Shop that Hermione could barely stand to hear them.

“Maybe I couldn’t stand to live without you, either,” Hermione said sharply. “What makes you more important than I am?” A glimmer of a smile belied the acerbic note in the voice.

“Nothing. I’m just a selfish prat,” Harry said, in like manner, and they mutually agreed, without actually speaking, to drop the subject for the time being. He leaned toward her, and she sighed as their heads touched. His hand felt clammy in hers, and she squeezed his fingers more tightly.

“I wonder how Ginny’s doing?” Hermione said conversationally, after a moment, looking toward the infirmary door. Almost as if she’d invited it with her question, a loud clamor and several shouting voices rang from within the infirmary. Harry and Hermione exchanged worried glances, and Tonks had already jumped to her feet. They could hear Ron yelling something that sounded like,

“What did you do to her?” followed by an indistinct reply from – Hermione assumed – Penelope Clearwater.

The infirmary door opened, and the light shone in a beam out into the dim corridor, with a McGonagall shaped silhouette in the midst of it. When the door had been opened, the shrill, hysterical screaming could be clearly heard.

It was Ginny, and her frantic pleas chilled Hermione’s blood.

“I want my mother. Where is she? Where is she? What’s wrong with me? What’s wrong with me?”

“Mr. Potter, can you come with me please?” McGonagall looked more drawn and old than Hermione had ever seen her. Even backlit as she was against the illumination of the infirmary, Hermione could see the lines etched even more deeply around her eyes and mouth.

“Professor, what – what’s the matter? What can I do?” By now everyone in the hall had come to his or her feet, and Hermione was startled at the amount of emotion in Harry’s face.

“Don’t touch me! Where am I? My eyes are open, but why am I not awake? Why am I not awake? Where’s Harry? Harry! Harry, help me, please.” The shriek went up so high, that Hermione flinched, and Luna buried her face in her hands. Tonks clutched at Remus’s arm, and murmured something unintelligible, probably Dear Merlin. “What have you done with my mother? Where’s Harry?”

“Mr. Potter, please,” McGonagall said urgently. “Miss Clearwater doesn’t want to sedate her – and I agree – without knowing more about what she’s recovering from. Please, you may be able to calm her.”

“But –” her family. Hermione could tell that the words trembled, unspoken, on Harry’s lips. Ginny’s hoarse wails continued unabated in the background, and Hermione could now hear the hushed reassurances from her father and her brothers, falling unheeded in the small periods of silence. “All right, Professor,” he finally said, letting the rest of his doubts go unvoiced. He cast an unreadable look at Hermione, over his shoulder, and she trailed behind him to the doorway. As he crossed the threshold, he called out gently,

“Ginny, it’s all right. I’m right here. And – and Fred and Ron and your dad are here as well.” Ginny was sitting up in bed, her eyes were wide and blank, staring at nothing, though she looked toward the door at Harry’s voice. She put her hands over her ears, and shook her head wildly, tears streaming down her face.

“No, no, they’re dead. They’re all dead. I keep seeing it – I keep seeing it, over and over again.” Hermione saw Harry cast a helpless look at Penelope Clearwater, who was scanning Ginny with her wand,

a look of fear and worry on her pretty face. Penelope nodded at him, and her attitude seemed to be say something, say anything!

“They’re not dead, Ginny. They’re here. And I’m here. It’s okay.” A tremble rushed through Ginny’s slight frame, and she stuck her arm out at her side, her fingers groping for his touch. Hermione watched in the doorway, transfixed, and knew the exact moment that Harry realized that Ginny was blind. A sort of spasm trembled across his shoulders. Ginny’s face relaxed the moment Harry’s fingers touched hers, and Hermione realized suddenly and inexplicably that she was jealous.

“Harry, Harry, can you make it stop? Can’t you make it stop?” Ginny’s voice was pleading. The Weasleys sat motionless, stunned into utter silence at the raving, hysterical mess that was their youngest member. Tears trickled down Mr. Weasley’s otherwise unmoving face, and he reached out for Ginny’s other hand, only to have her recoil away from his touch, shuddering towards Harry.

“Tell me what’s wrong, and I’ll stop it, Ginny,” Harry said seriously, and Hermione’s heard cracked a little. His voice was so gentle. He was holding her hand, patting it softly with his other one. Ginny looked up in his general direction, but did not flinch at the harsh light pouring its essence down on her bed.

“Where’s Mum? I need my mum. Where is she?” The plaintiveness in Ginny’s voice was heartrending. Hermione saw Harry’s spine go rigid. Penelope surreptitiously wiped a tear from her cheek, and McGonagall seemed to have forgotten that she had an avid audience peering in the open door.

“Ginny...” Harry’s voice cracked, and he cleared his throat roughly. “Ginny, love, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. She’s – she’s – ” But Ginny was wailing again, before Harry could finish his sentence. Her hands went back over her ears, and Hermione could not help wondering what she was hearing that no one else could hear.

“Make him stop, Harry. Make him stop! He says he killed her. He says she’s dead. Make him stop saying that!”

"Ginny," Harry said, sitting on the edge of the bed, still holding her hand. "Make who stop?" Ginny pierced him suddenly with such a sharp, seeing look that Hermione felt chills run up her back.

"You Know Who, Harry," Ginny said in a sing-song tone, beginning to rock back and forth in the bed. Harry and Ron shot alarmed looks toward the door, and Hermione heard both Lupin and Tonks draw their wands.

"Voldemort?" Harry blurted, and several people in the room jumped, even though most, by now, had become accustomed to hearing his name, if not saying it. "Voldemort's in your head?"

"Don't say his name. Don't say his name," Ginny rocked more violently. "He's in the Chamber. He's in the Chamber. Just like before. But you can make him stop, Harry. Please. Please, make him stop."

"The Chamber of Secrets? Ginny, you're not in the Chamber. You're not at Hogwarts. You're safe. You're safe now." Harry was speaking in clipped, concise sentences, enunciating his words as one might with a small child, or someone linguistically challenged.

"Just like before, just like before," Ginny crooned, rocking back and forth, gripping Harry's hand tightly. A sob bubbled out of Mr. Weasley, and startled everyone. Hermione saw Ron nudge Fred sharply, and the remaining twin helped Mr. Weasley off of the empty adjacent bed, and escorted him from the room, with a murmured,

"C'mon, Dad."

"There's blood on my robes," Ginny said softly, like a child wondering at a budding flower or the first snow of winter. "He says he killed them. He says he killed them." Ron stood abruptly, almost as if he were propelled from his chair, but he didn't leave, standing instead at the foot of Ginny's bed, his lanky body all points and angles, with his hands stuffed deeply into his pockets.

"You're the mediwitch," he all but spat at Penelope. "What the hell's wrong with her?" Penelope took a small step backward, recoiling away from the grieving and angry brother.

“Mr. Weasley,” warned McGonagall, but her voice was but a shadow of its usual austere self.

“I’ve – I’ve only heard about spells like this. I’ve never seen one in action. They’re new. Very Dark. They – ” she shook her head. “They’re Nightmare Curses. They’ll probably join the Unforgivable list. The blindness is almost psychosomatic, possibly reversible, and definitely the least of our problems right now. It comes from being repeatedly and unendingly exposed to one’s nightmares. But I – I don’t – I don’t understand – ”

“She’s been seeing nightmares for over a week?” Ron said in a horrified whisper.

“What don’t you understand, Penelope?” Tonks prodded gently from the doorway.

“They have to be keyed to one person specifically. You have to know the person you’re going to attack.” The former Ravenclaw shook her head. “If – if the spell was meant for Ginny, that could be the reason that her mother was killed. The curse would have been incompatible with her.” Her eyes drifted over to the girl, rocking in her bed, wet-cheeked, clutching Harry as if he were a lifeline. “But I don’t understand why anyone would specifically target Ginny. That curse takes just as much malice as any Crucio.”

Hermione knew. And she felt like her heart would explode into splinters, and those painfully sharp shards would dig their way through her flesh in an effort to escape her miserable sadness.

“It was because of me,” Harry said suddenly, his voice dropping into the stillness. He looked up at Hermione, and his feelings shone on his face plainly enough for anyone to see, if anyone had really been paying attention. She flushed under his scrutiny, realizing that he knew she knew. “Because we – we used to be involved.”

“But, Harry, that was ages ago,” Ron spoke up, mystified.

"Maybe Voldemort doesn't know that," Harry said heavily, prompting Ginny to warn him again not to say that name. He paused to hush her gently, running one hand down the length of her shiny, red hair. Hermione felt her insides shrivel up, even as she hated herself for holding simple touches against a traumatized girl so in need of them. "By the time we went looking for – for – " his eyes darted furtively around the room, and he didn't finish his sentence. "I had already pretty much mastered Occlumency. He had no way to know that – that we weren't – that I ... anymore," he finished lamely and almost incoherently.

"I know you'll make him stop, Harry. I always knew you could. Please, Harry. I'm so tired of being in the Chamber. Won't you take me away from the Chamber?" He was sitting on the edge of her bed, very close to her, but her gaze was distant, looking through him, past him, rather than at him.

"Of course, Ginny. Of course, I'll take you away." He put his hand to his forehead, above the bridge of his nose, and looked so tired and worn that Hermione just wanted to wrap her arms around him and never let him go.

"Ginny? It's Ron, it's your brother," Ron began, his voice erupting from him almost desperately, even as Penelope laid a warning hand on his arm.

"NO!" Ginny shrieked, cowering behind Harry. Hermione could see the indentations that her fingers were leaving in his shirt. "No, you're not Ron. Ron's dead. He said so. He killed them all. Their bodies shall lie in the Chamber forever. Forever. Forever. Forever!" Her voice rose with each successive repetition of the word, and Ron stumbled back toward the doorway, nearly bowling over Hermione, who saved him from falling gracelessly out into the corridor. Ginny was striking out blindly, flailing arms with fingers hooked into curved claws. Harry was intercepting the blows, speaking rapidly in words that Hermione could not catch, trying to calm her down.

"Please," Harry said, with a shaky voice that betrayed him. When he turned toward Penelope, Hermione could clearly see the shine in his eyes. "Please, can't you just give her something?" Penelope and

McGonagall exchanged glances, and the recently arrived mediwitch nodded, her lips pressed tightly together in sympathy.

“You’ll probably have to give it to her,” Penelope said, handing Harry a clear vial with a Sleeping Draught in it. Harry cradled Ginny back in his arms, holding the vial aloft so that her thrashing movement did not spill the liquid.

“Ginny? Ginny, love, I’ve got a potion for you. It’s going to make you feel better. Can you open your mouth for me? There’s a girl,” he crooned, as she obeyed him, and placidly drank the potion.

“You’re – you’re still going to take me away from here, right, Harry? Away from the Chamber? I’m so tired of being here.” The last sentence was a breathy, barely audible sigh, as the potion quickly began to take hold.

“Away from the Chamber. I promise,” he said softly, even though she could no longer hear him. He handed the empty vial back to Penelope, and eased Ginny down onto the mattress, gently extracting his arm out from underneath her. He stood uncertainly, and ran one hand through his messy hair. Hermione noticed that the hand in question was trembling violently.

“You’ll – you’ll come get me, if she needs me?” Harry asked Penelope, almost managing to make it sound like a request instead of a command.

“Of course, Harry,” she said, in a voice of quiet assurance. He moved toward the door, with the hunched posture of someone much older.

“Penelope,” Hermione said suddenly. “How did you – how did you wake her up?”

“It was a combination of a couple of potions and an Enervate charm. Her twitching looked like a textbook case of a Nightmare Curse, so I risked it. Waking her up just proved it.”

“How do you stop it?” Harry blurted, the words tumbling woodenly from his lips like someone else had directed him to speak.

"I don't know, Harry," Penelope said apologetically, shaking her head. "We at least interrupted the flow of nightmares just now, and that had to have helped. But if we can't stop them permanently, then – " She hesitated, and her eyes flickered uncertainly over to Ron.

"Then?" the other redhead prodded.

"Then Ginny will go mad."

TBC

Hmmm... well, I sort of liked the last part. I don't want anyone to think that Harry has any lingering feelings for Ginny, beyond concern for a close friend and guilt that he had somehow caused this situation. He's also going to do whatever he can to help facilitate her recovery. Hermione's insecurity about it will cause some conflict, but there's not going to be any actual H/G. I've said this in other fics, but I do like the Weasleys (the fact that I've killed a lot of them notwithstanding), and I don't intend to Ginny- or Ron-bash. This is an H/Hr story though.

Anyway, I hope you liked it, and that you will let me know that you did. Always love getting reviews. You may leave one on your way out if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Nine: Betrayal

Hermione sat in the War Room, her brow furrowed in concentration, an errant lock of hair slipping from the restraining clip so that it fell forward and clung to her cheek. She brushed it away with some irritation, and trained her new wand back on the smashed watch laying on the smooth wooden surface of the desk in front of her. If she could have focused the intensity emanating from her eyes, she could have probably blown the watch to bits, but that was not her goal.

She laid her wand down with a click on the desk, and sighed, sitting back in the chair for a moment. She massaged her temples with the fingertips of both hands. It just wasn't going to work. I think a strong Cloaking spell woven into the formation of the portkey will be enough to keep people from tracing it. But if I don't know how they traced it, I'm not going to be able to test it to see if it even works! She picked up the wand again, and pulling it up from the watch face, as if she were pulling out a memory for a pensieve, she carefully extracted the components of the portkey spell. There were three: a traveling spell, a triggering spell, and a rather complicated audio spell, by which the song selected was maintained in the portkey's "memory" and which in turn activated the triggering spell, making it moderately more involved than a traditional portkey. The spells hovered softly above the watch, floating in soft, translucent clouds of varying colors. She propped her chin up on one hand, and regarded the spells for a moment. They blurred before her eyes, and her head nodded abruptly, before she jerked herself back upright. She jumped up and began to pace the room, trying to blink away the blariness. She had not been sleeping well.

Maybe Harry could...she thought, but immediately discarded that notion. For her to be able to properly figure out how to trace it, someone would have to portkey to a place that she didn't know about beforehand. Since Harry couldn't set the portkeys himself, that would force him to ask people to do it for him, and Hermione didn't fancy embarrassing him unnecessarily. That, and he's spent an awful lot of time in the infirmary over the last two days, came the unbidden thought, and she immediately winced, looking guiltily over her shoulder, even though she was alone in the room.

So now the real reason comes out. Like you're fooling anyone, Practical Hermione said snidely, obviously still disgruntled over having fallen from the forefront of Hermione's mind.

I'm not jealous of Harry and Ginny. That's just...ridiculous.

Nobody ever said ridiculous and true were mutually exclusive. Hermione's brows lowered into a glare, and she thrust the three spells back into the portkey with more violence than was actually needed. Still, the image of him holding Ginny's hand, stroking her hair, calling her 'love', and speaking to her in that full-of-emotion, oh-so-gentle voice – it was seared unwillingly into her mind, much like the kiss in the Gryffindor common room over a year ago.

It seemed like a lifetime since then.

So you want Harry to talk to you like that? Well, maybe he will when you're completely out of your head, raving about dead people, as a result of some terrible new curse. Would it be worth it? Irritated, Hermione picked up her defunct watch by one end of the leather band, and threw it across the room. It hit the map of England with a thunk, and slid to the floor.

"Oy! I know you're brilliant and all, Hermione, but I still don't think that will repair your watch," came Fred's voice from the doorway. Hermione looked up toward him, startled and blushing. "Unless you're just 'venting' again? I've heard about your penchant for breaking things." He wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"Honestly, Fred!" Hermione said stiffly, sitting quickly and shifting in her chair uncomfortably, even as part of her was glad to see some classic Weasley-twin ribbing going on. The new, more subdued Fred simultaneously made Hermione both uneasy and relieved. She could definitely relate to and work with this more business-like, contemplative Fred. But, at the same time, she was well aware that he wasn't the Fred she'd always known, and her heart broke a little for what was lost.

"Speaking of breaking things," he said, turning a chair around and straddling it backwards. There was a rolled-up section of parchment

squashed under one arm. “No more you and Ron?” He tilted the corners of his mouth upward to show he meant no offense, but his eyes were serious, searching hers.

“I really don’t want to talk about this,” she muttered, averting her eyes. Fred lifted both hands, as if to ward her off.

“I – I don’t want to meddle in your affairs, Hermione. As delicious as it would be to get some ammunition on Ron, I really just wanted to check and see if it had anything to do with Dad getting hurt, because I – ” He stopped, as Hermione was already shaking her head.

“No, no. Ron was upset, but he didn’t blame me – not really. There was no need for him to, when I’ll always blame myself,” she tried to speak light-heartedly, but didn’t really achieve it.

“Hermione, you know you don’t need to – ” But Hermione was waving one hand at him, a little tiredly, as if to say don’t worry about it.

“Anyway, that’s not why we broke up,” Hermione said, leaning forward in the chair and scrunching up her shoulders. “It was – it was inevitable, I think. And I think I’ve known it for awhile now. It just – with everything that’s happened, I – I hated to do that to him. I kept thinking, maybe once it all settles down...”

“Using the chaos of the situation seems like a pretty poor excuse for staying with someone,” Fred remarked, and Hermione snapped her head up to look at him. “Hey, I’m saying you did the right thing. He doesn’t need you to stay with him because you feel sorry for him.” Hermione slumped, burying her face in both hands.

“How is he?” she mumbled through her fingers. She peered back up at Fred, whose gaze seemed distant.

“Bout the same, I reckon,” he said, shrugging. “It’s just another thing on a long list of things that he doesn’t want to process. Can’t say I blame him much.” He looked at Hermione’s stricken face, and smiled. “Don’t worry about him, Hermione. He’s a Weasley, and we’re made of pretty stern stuff. He’ll be all right.” Hermione wondered if Fred was

trying to convince her or himself. "Anyway," he said presently. "That's not why I came to find you."

Hermione picked up her quill and crossed her legs, cocking her head at him in an inquisitive fashion and willing away the fatigue. "What do you need?" she asked, deducing that he was approaching her about a task. If something had been wrong, they wouldn't have had the somewhat unsettling conversation about Ron.

"It's about Remus," Fred began.

"It's going to be the full moon soon," Hermione interjected, nodding knowingly. He extracted the parchment that she had seen earlier, and unfurled it for her inspection.

"I've shown this to Tonks, and she thinks it's a good idea. She wanted me to see if you'd help with some of the spellwork."

"Me? But Tonks is – "

"She reckons you're the best spellcaster here. At least when it comes to innovating." Flushing under his praise, Hermione leaned forward to examine the parchment. On it was a layout of the house, as well as the cliff on which it sat. There appeared to be a series of caves set into the cliffs down on the beach level. "What do you think?"

"You want to put Remus in here during his change?" Hermione queried. She pulled the blueprint closer, her eyes darting back and forth to different sections, alight with excitement. "That looks doable, provided these caves are high enough above the waterline."

"High tide only gets within about 10 meters of the entrance," Fred replied.

"I'm not sure about having a tunnel leading up to the house," Hermione stated, her eyes traveling from the diagram of the caves up to where the house sat atop the cliff. "That's two places to ward against a werewolf. We're making the job twice as hard."

“Not if that tunnel can be used as an escape route,” Fred pointed out. Something like panic flared up in Hermione’s eyes briefly.

“This place is Unplottable. And under a Fidelius charm. They’re not going to find us here, Fred!”

“Hey, hey!” Fred said softly. “I didn’t say they were. It’s just a contingency plan. With the anti-Apparation wards extending all the way to the beach, I figured this would be a good way to get past them quickly and secretly. And – with your medallions – we’d just need one person to make it past the wards, and we could all join him – or her – just like that.” He snapped his fingers, and Hermione smiled in spite of herself.

“You’re right, of course,” she murmured softly, while inwardly chastising herself for acting like a silly, frightened child.

“I hope you don’t mind, Hermione,” Fred added in a conversational tone. “But I took my medallion apart, just to see all the spell components, and – ” he shook his head, whistling in admiration. “And it is a piece of work, let me tell you. If you ever want a job at Weasleys’ Wizarding Wheezes, then we – ” A shudder seemed to pass over his face, and the blank look she’d seen at the Shop was back. She reached out and squeezed his hand, her face sympathetic.

“Thanks, Fred,” she said quietly. “The fact that you’d be willing to hire a stickler-for-the-rules bookworm means a lot to me. I might hold you to it one day!”

“I might hold you to that,” Fred replied in kind, and his mood seemed to pass. “What say we go down to the caves, and check them out first-hand? We ought to go ahead and start forming the tunnel. There isn’t a lot of time left. What is it?” A odd sort of look had flitted across Hermione’s face, a desperate, concentrating look, as if she had remembered something important, but, just as quickly, lost it again.

“I thought – when you said that about offering me the job...” she sat silently for a moment longer, but then shook her head. “No, it’s gone. Maybe I’ll think of it later.” Hermione stood, grabbed her wand, and moved quickly across the room to retrieve her watch. She fastened it

back on her wrist. Her mind was already moving at a million kilometers per hour, and sleep seemed nearly that far away.

“We’ll need some pretty heavy-duty Silencios too,” Hermione said, as Fred held the back door for her, and they headed for the narrow, windy path that meandered back and forth across the rocky cliff face down to the flat stretch of rocky beach and the water’s edge. “It would do us no good for villagers nearby to report hearing a wolf at the seashore, and bringing all the Death Eaters in this half of Britain down on our heads.”

She found Harry in the garret several hours later. The china had been repaired and repacked in the crates, and he was sitting beneath the window, gazing out at the vast, ever-changing surface of the ocean. He was staring intently, as if he could plumb the hidden depths of that expanse by sheer will alone, and appeared to be very far away. He did not seem to hear Hermione’s entrance.

If Hermione had her guess, she’d say that he was thinking about the way things used to be....when the three of them were alone and terrified, sleeping propped against each other in dirty back rooms of abandoned, derelict buildings, hunting for bits of Voldemort’s soul. They had wondered then if it could possibly get any worse.

If it could get any worse... Her lips compressed together in sympathy, as she regarded him quietly. At least then, they’d had a direction, a mission, a reason for getting up in the morning. At least then, he’d been powerful and determined, his nobility and strength of character shining from his face like a beacon. At least then, she and Ron had had the pretense of happiness. At least then, the noisy, bustling, chaotic Weasley household had always welcomed them, even disheveled and exhausted, for breakfast and brief respite at the Burrow on Saturday mornings. Oh, Harry...she thought, and she must have sighed a little or scuffed the sole of her shoe against the floor, for he turned, starting for an instant, before he realized who was there.

“Hi, Hermione,” he offered, trying to smile. She clasped her hands, and smiled at him, noticing with some horror when she looked down that her fingernails were caked with dirt. Dirt streaked down the front

of her blouse as well. "Been making mud pies?" he asked, with a trace of his old humor, noticing the direction of her gaze and the mortified look on her face.

"I was digging a tunnel with Fred," she stammered. He quirked one eyebrow at her.

"Don't you have a way to do that," he gestured toward her wand, "without...you know ... ?" He curved his fingers and mimed scrabbling in dirt with both hands.

"Part of the ceiling fell in on me at the beginning," she admitted, shrugging self-deprecatingly. "I told Fred to use his wand to scan for most stable route. He did after that, and everything went quite smoothly. The entrance is in the cellar, of course." She was babbling now. "I know I should have showered before coming to find you, but when you weren't in the infirmary..."

"Is Ginny okay?" he asked, interrupting her with sudden alarm.

"No, she's – she's – sedated again, which is doing as well as can be expected, I guess. It's just – you've spent so much time with her lately, that I figured you'd be there."

"Are you mad?" His tone was somewhat guarded, his head down, but he chanced a quick glance at her through his lashes.

Hermione considered the question. Was she angry? No. That was easy enough to determine. But she also didn't really think that was what Harry had meant. Was she jealous, really actually jealous? Did she think that Harry was playing her for a fool, that his affections were somehow divided between her and Ginny? No. She rather thought that she knew Harry better than most, perhaps better than any. He was not the type to string people along; it would never occur to him. Did she worry that perhaps Harry would see Ginny's cascade of flaming red hair, and realize that he'd made a terrible mistake? Or feel so sorry for her in all that she'd endured and lost that he'd be unable to tear himself away from her? Chagrin flickered across Hermione's face. Maybe.

“No,” she said uncertainly, making it almost sound like a question.
“She needs you. I understand that.”

“But – ?” he prodded, after she remained silent for a long moment.

“Harry, you didn’t see yourself in the Gryffindor common room that day – the day you kissed Ginny in front of God and everybody. It was – it was like you were lit from within, and the – the – the triumph for you, just to be normal, just to feel something every teenager feels, it – it was amazing ... and beautiful. She was the girl you had to leave behind, the girl who’s been cursed, lost her family, pleading with you to save her life again. I’m afraid – I – what if you realize you made a mistake, or you change your mind?”

Harry reached up suddenly, and grabbed Hermione around both elbows, pulling her down to the ground beside him. His expression was fierce.

“She’s not the girl I had to leave behind. She’s the girl I chose to leave behind. I didn’t want to put her in danger if I didn’t have to. I don’t want to put you in danger either, but I – but I – ” he brought one hand up to cup the angle of her jaw line. He shook his head slightly, with the air of one admitting a weakness. “I need you too much. That day in the common room, I was – I was pretending to be normal, and I – I enjoyed it while it lasted. But I’m not normal, Hermione. I never was, and I certainly never will be again, not anymore. I saved Ginny’s life once, and I’ll do anything necessary to help her again, but I – I’m not in love with her. I’m not sure that I ever was.”

They sat silently for a while, sitting beneath the window with their legs folded, knees toward each other. Somehow, Hermione’s arms were in Harry’s lap, and he was running his fingers up and down and over and across the skin of her fingertips, knuckles, wrists, and forearms.

“What – what’s happened to Ginny, it has gotten me thinking though,” Harry ventured hesitantly after a moment. Oh, no, Hermione thought, and she put two slender fingers against Harry’s lips.

“I don’t want to hear it, Harry,” she said gently, noticeably surprising him. “You’re going to say something about how it was your fault, how

the Death Eater targeted her – probably on Voldemort's orders – just because she was the last known person with whom you'd been publicly in a relationship. You're thinking that it's all your fault that she was hit. You're thinking it's all your fault that you somehow let slip the knowledge of your feelings for me, even though you were being tortured. You're thinking that if the Death Eaters will do that to someone like Ginny...then what does that mean they'd do to me, if they ever took me?" Harry was staring at her, all the color drained from his face, highlighting the deep shadows beneath his vivid eyes. She wondered idly how much sleep he'd been getting lately. "Have I got it about right?" He didn't respond, and she added, even more softly, "That's how he found out about me, isn't it? How he knew to make those Muggle girls look like me? Though I shudder to think of all the hair and 'bits' of people he must have filed away, in case he ever needs them for Polyjuice." She shuddered a little, trying to speak lightly, though it didn't quite fly. Harry smiled a little, more in appreciation of the effort, she thought, than anything else.

"He cast the Nightmare curse on me. A couple of times – at least, I guess that's what it was." Harry spoke in a wooden voice, with staring, vacant eyes. "He never left it on me for long. He didn't want me mad; he wanted me perfectly sane and absolutely clear on what he was doing to me. But he was in there." A sort of disgusted spasm passed across his face. "He was in my mind the whole time...just trolling ... to see what he could find. And he found the nightmare – that – that I was the reason you'd been killed." Hermione blinked, and she was startled to feel dampness on her cheeks. She wound her hands more tightly through his, so that the four of them were tangled together in his lap. His words made more sense now. He knew there was nothing worse he could do to me.

"And – and Ginny?" she croaked, effortfully. Harry lifted both shoulders in a heavy, slow shrug that visibly enacted the weight of the world that figuratively sat on them. Ancient sorrows seemed to swim forlornly in the pools of his eyes.

"She – I guess she was a stab in the dark. A lucky guess. Thank God I didn't take up with anybody seventh year. I might – I might have known something like this would happen."

“Well, at least I don’t have to worry about your throwing me aside out of some misguided sense of responsibility and noble selflessness,” Hermione spoke lightly again, but her eyes echoed the weighty sentiments of his own.

“Hermione, I – ” he spoke quickly, as if to counter her previous statement.

“He already knows, Harry,” she said, speaking lightly, even though a knell of dread began pumping heavily in her chest with the rhythm of her heart. She clasped his hands tighter to disguise their shaking. Coward! Her inner voice taunted. Was she a Gryffindor or not? “He already knows how you feel about me. He’s going to come after me, just as he’s kept coming after you. You can’t change that now. Even by casting me aside.” Harry trembled, and she reached out to wrap her arms around him. He swore quite rudely under his breath, but his voice was wobbly and lost.

“Hermione!” And in the word was abject shock and devastation, as he obviously acknowledged her cool assessment as correct. “And there’s nothing – nothing – I can do about it. I can’t protect you. I can’t even protect myself. For the love of all that is holy, Hermione, I’m sorry.” The apology poured out of him, a rush of babbling words flowing through and around her, soothing somehow in their very inanity.

She brushed his damp, dark hair back from his temples, and shushed him softly, crooning something low and wordless that did not need to be defined. One hand was on his cheek, fingertips in his hair, and her other hand crooked around his neck. Their foreheads were nearly touching.

“I said something to you the other day, about making the most of the time we were given. D’you remember?” She infused her voice with a sprightliness that she did not really feel. Harry nodded, his head bumping lightly against hers. She did not move away from him. “I want to do that – make the most of my time with – with you... so I’m – I’m going to tell Ron,” she blurted suddenly.

He looked up at her then, with alarmed eyes.

“He doesn’t deserve to be kept in the dark, Harry,” she said, speaking rapidly to override the forthcoming protests. “It’s not going to be easy, but it’s better this way. And I – I don’t like the idea of our sneaking around, hiding in closets, or something. I – I don’t want him to think we’re – we’re betraying him.”

“He’s going to think that anyway,” Harry pointed out pragmatically, in a rather dull voice. “It doesn’t matter when he finds out, he’s still going to feel betrayed.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” she asked, icicles fringing the edges of her voice. “Keep it a secret from him – until when?”

“Is it really better to tell him now, when he’s lost nearly everything, his home, his family, his way of life? Just so you won’t feel guilty?” Hermione’s mouth opened soundlessly, and she blinked at him, stunned by his accusation.

“And – and you think we should lie to him...just so he won’t feel badly about it?” she finally said, intentionally mimicking his sentence structure. Harry seemed to deflate, his head sinking away from hers, hunching toward his chest.

“I didn’t say that,” he replied, in a muffled voice. Hermione sighed.

“We’re talking in circles here, Harry. What is it you want?” Every bone in his body went rigid, and he looked sharply up at her again, with blazing eyes.

“What is it I want?” he echoed her question incredulously, and Hermione instinctively knew that she’d said the wrong thing. “What I want is to get my hands on a time-turner, and undo everything that’s happened in the last month. What I want is to forget that my friends’ lives have been shattered – or ended! – because a madman’s quest for vengeance and absolute power involves me. What I want is to have my magic back at least long enough for one clear, point-blank shot at Voldemort. What I want is to have told you how I felt about you, when I first realized what it was, or that I had realized it before – before Ron did.” He swallowed, and appeared to be gathering his

composure around him like a cloak. "What I want," he said softly, pausing to run his tongue over dry lips, "is to take you down to the beach and snog away the worried, sad shadows from your eyes."

Instinctively, her gaze darted away from his, but almost immediately dragged reluctantly back. Her eyes pooled with tears. She didn't have to speak; they were thinking the same thing. If only... A tear welled up above the edge of her lower lid, and dribbled down her cheek. She rolled her eyes at herself, and reached up to dash it away, but Harry beat her to it. He brushed the tear aside with his thumb, and left sparks in his wake. She tilted her head quickly to kiss him; her lips landed on the side of his wrist.

"You better tell him," Harry said abruptly, in a rather hoarse voice. "He won't hit you." Hermione looked at him reprovingly.

"Harry..." she chided, but he gave her a look as if to say, What? You think he wouldn't hit me? What dream world do you live in? She conceded his point without words, and said, "I'll try to talk to him after dinner." She paused, looking at him doubtfully. "You might not want to sleep in the same room with him tonight." Harry gave her a See! I was right! look, but his eyes were evasive. She met his gaze questioningly.

"Actually, I haven't slept down there in ... about a week, I reckon," he mumbled, sounding embarrassed. Hermione looked at him, startled.

"Where have you been sleeping?"

"In that last bedroom...the empty one. Tonks put a Silencio on it for me, and I – I've just been – " he stopped, as Hermione's eyes welled up again, this time with furious tears.

"You've been having nightmares, haven't you? Haven't you?" His stony silence was all the answer she needed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because I knew you would act like this!" Harry shot back. "The nightmares are nothing new, Hermione, trust me. I've been dealing with them on my own for a long time."

“But, Harry, if there’s any way I can help you, you know I – ”

“How have you been sleeping, Hermione?” Harry asked suddenly, almost rudely. She waved her hand loftily, as if brushing aside his question.

“I’m sleeping fine, Harry. We’re not talking about me, we’re – ”

“You’re not sleeping at all, are you? I know how much time you spend down in the War Room. How you’re the last one down there at night, and the first one there in the morning.” He speared her with an accusing look.

“I’ve always been an early – ”

“Did you think I wouldn’t notice these?” he asked, his voice now very gentle, as he rubbed his thumbs on the thin, soft, shadowy skin beneath her eyes. “You want to help everybody, but you won’t let anybody help you.” She felt herself turn to putty under the influence of that soft voice, loving gaze, and caressing touch. She closed her eyes momentarily, as if pausing to concede to the inevitable.

“How can I lay any other burdens on you, Harry?” she asked plaintively. “You’ve already been through so much – are still going through so much – and I don’t want to heap my issues on top of that. Not that you’re one to talk about asking people for help!” Harry quirked one side of his mouth up into a half smile, and appeared mesmerized by the rough wooden planks of the floor.

“I didn’t want to burden you either. I feel like enough of a burden as it is,” he admitted. She watched his face pensively for a moment, and decided to speak honestly.

“I don’t want to go to sleep, Harry. I don’t find any rest in it at all. Sleep is time wasted, when I could be figuring something out. Besides, I see him, when I sleep. Killing that girl – me – over and over again. And the lost, broken look on your face... I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.” Her brown eyes had a haunted look.

“Why haven’t you asked Penelope for a Sleeping Draught?” he asked gently. “I’ve gotten one for myself on more than one occasion.”

“You and Ginny need them so much more than I do – and who knows when we’ll no longer be able to regularly replenish our potion stocks?”

“You really think you’re worth that much less?” he asked, concern rumpling his scar up on his forehead.

“What? No, of course not!” She harrumphed a little. “What a ridiculous question!” She knew that she sounded particularly like Prefect Hermione, and was rewarded with a smile from Harry. She smiled back, though it went a little crooked and watery towards the end.

He leaned toward her then, and kissed her gently and lingeringly on the lips. She meshed into his embrace, as his arms went around her, and the sense of warmth and belonging nearly overwhelmed her. When they broke the kiss, he cupped her face in his hands, and met her somber gaze with one of his own.

“Go get a Sleeping Draught from Penelope,” he ordered softly. “You need rest – dreamless rest. I don’t want anything to happen to that brilliant brain of yours.” He smiled then, and Hermione felt ridiculously happy that she could – even now – inspire a smile from him. She kissed him again.

“I will, Harry, if you’ll promise that you’ll talk to me. Neither of us is doing the other any good by keeping everything inside.” The light in his eyes faded, and she could tell that he was less than thrilled with her admonition, but instead of arguing, he just nodded.

“And I’ll talk to Ron,” he finally said, somewhat reluctantly, as if the words had been dragged from him. Hermione strove to keep her eyes from sparkling with relief, but didn’t think she’d managed it.

“I thought you were worried about his reaction,” she said absently. Harry shrugged, and said in a tone that was only mostly bitter,

“I’m the Squib Who Escaped. What else could he really do to me?” Hermione’s features became sorrowful, and she could see the regret glinting in Harry’s eyes.

“Harry, don’t say tha –”

“What? The truth? That I’m a Squib?” He raised his eyebrows at her, and she realized that the coolly mocking demeanor was back.

“Harry, you don’t know that it’s permanent! If there’s a way to fix this, I swear to you, I’ll find it.” He regarded her solemnly for a moment, and then snorted, the barest puff of air out through his nostrils.

“I want to believe that, Hermione.” He finally said, almost reluctantly. She leaned closer to him then, and pulled them both to their feet, standing so closing that they were nearly breathing in each other’s mouths. She kissed him again, a deeper kiss this time, one that she hoped conveyed all of her hopes and fears and longing and desire for him. She felt his hands clasp themselves behind her back, and felt the tense lines of his body relax against hers.

She leaned her forehead against his for just a moment, as they strove to return to normal breathing patterns.

“Then believe it, Harry. When have I ever failed at anything I’ve put my mind to?”

They parted at the stairs, as Harry continued down to find Ron, and Hermione backtracked to the infirmary. Someone was moving around inside, and she hoped that Penelope would be alone in there. Harry’s words of comfort notwithstanding, she did not want the entire house to be aware that she needed a Draught to be able to sleep. Rationally, she knew no one would think less of her, but somehow her self-sufficient pride would not be able to stomach it.

She paused for a moment with a hand on the knob, to gather her composure, which had been somewhat more than frayed by her shared kisses with Harry. It’s just a potion. A silly sleeping potion that a second-year could concoct! With one sudden movement, she twisted the knob violently and lurched into the room.

Ginny lay motionless in the nearest bed to the door. Neville was at the open window, leaning on the sill, and peering out. When Hermione entered abruptly, he startled violently and comically, twisting and flattening himself against the window.

"It's just me, Neville," she said in an amused tone. Color stained Neville's round face.

"You scared me," he muttered. "What are you playing at, just bounding into a room like that? Bound to set anybody off."

"Sure, Neville," Hermione said companionably, smiling at him. She'd always liked Neville, for all his forgetfulness and bumbling ways. "Where's Penelope? I wanted to speak with her about – about something," she trailed off vaguely.

"I think she stepped out to get a bite to eat," Neville offered. "I told her I'd keep an eye on Ginny for her." Hermione's eyes drifted over to the prone Weasley in the only occupied bed.

"How's she doing?" the older girl asked softly, even though she'd just been by there not too long ago. Neville shrugged, his eyes also fixed on Ginny.

"Whenever Penelope tries to wake her up, we're treated to another of those screaming fits," Neville said. "But when she's sedated, she's living those nightmares. Harry's presence does seem to help though." An odd emotion passed suddenly across his face, and Hermione watched him in wonder. He's jealous of Harry's connection with Ginny, she thought suddenly.

"It's going to be all right, Neville," she said soothingly, patting him on the shoulder. "When Ginny comes out of it, I'll be sure and tell her how well you looked after her." Neville stared at her suddenly, looking more and more uncomfortable as dawning awareness shone on his face. "Neville, it's okay, really. I won't tell anyone – if that's what you're worried about – and I –"

"What the hell are you trying to say, Harry?" Ron's angry voice suddenly seemed to be in the very room with them. Neville's eyes

widened with something like panic. Hermione did a slow circuit of the room, eyes toward the eaves.

“Where the hell did that come from?” she asked, curiously, moving toward the corner of the room nearest the window. Neville moved to intercept her, looking very somber.

“Acoustics can be weird in old houses like this one,” he said thoughtfully. “Maybe a downstairs window is open too or something. You think we should find out what’s going on?” He eyed her knowingly, and she wondered if he was remembering how he’d blundered in on her and Harry almost-kissing.

“I think I know what’s going on,” Hermione said with some chagrin, after a moment of hesitation. “I’ll go. Maybe I can keep this from coming to blows.”

“Do you need me to— ?” Neville began, gesturing in the direction of the door.

“No thank you. This is our mess. I should go help them clean it up,” she said, with a self-deprecating smile. As she moved toward the door, her foot caught the corner of a small stool, on which an uncapped bottle of mineral water sat. Neville lunged for it, but missed, as it landed on the floor and rolled a short distance, the sloshing water refracting back glittering facets of the sunlight. “Oh, Neville, I’m sorry, I —” she made a move toward where the bottle had landed, but Neville waved her off.

“Go on,” Neville said, not unkindly. “I’ll clean it up.” She blinked in the direction of the bottle’s landing place, and watched Neville fumble around on the floor for a distracted moment.

She turned and headed for the door at a rapid clip, one hand rubbing absently at one temple. Nervous, she told herself, you’re getting nervous and distracted and paranoid. She thought of her overreaction to Fred’s statement earlier that they needed an escape route. Maybe it’s because you haven’t slept, a voice that sounded remarkably like Harry’s reminded her. She told herself that she would defuse the situation between her boys, and then find Penelope Clearwater. She

tried to banish all thought of Neville's awkwardness and her own klutziness from her mind. But a thought remained and would not be squelched.

How come nothing spilled out of that water bottle?

Hermione heard no outbursts as she descended the stairs, but when she entered the War Room, Harry was leaning on the window sill, staring through the glass with his jaw jutting defiantly. Ron was on the other side of the room, with all the hallmarks of a towering temper except for steaming whistling from his ears.

"I'm surprised you haven't brought the entire Order running in here, with the way you're shouting, Ron," she said acerbically, once both of them had acknowledged her presence.

"I haven't been shouting at all, Hermione," Ron retorted. "But could you blame me if I was?" Hermione glanced quickly at the windows. They were closed. Her brow crinkled in puzzlement.

"But – " she began, but stopped almost as quickly. Harry looked across the room curiously at her hesitation.

"You're supposed to be sleeping," he stated quietly.

"I haven't found Penelope," she responded, feeling a flash of annoyance at him for worrying about that now.

"Is it true?" Ron interjected, whirling toward her. "Is what he said – is it true?" Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She dropped her gaze to the floor, but not in enough time to avoid seeing Ron's face suffuse with a mixture of anger, triumph at being right, and despair. Her inner Slytherins shrieked at her, Coward, coward! "That's why – why you wanted to end it then? To be with him?" Hermione's eyes slid shut, as she felt as if every organ in her body had suddenly twisted in pain. She forced herself to look back at him with some measure of calm.

"No, Ron, that's not why. That was because of us. It had nothing to do with Harry."

“Didn’t it?” He challenged, in a tone that fell a little short of completely belligerent. “Merlin, Hermione! It hasn’t even been three weeks yet.”

Hermione’s eyes flickered cautiously toward Harry. He was still half-sitting in the window sill, staring outside, though the inflexible set of his body betrayed that he was listening intently to everything that was being said.

“Ron, it’s been over between us for a lot longer than that, and you know it. If we hadn’t been hunting horcruxes – if we’d had a normal seventh year – maybe we would’ve been all right. But maybe not. Did you not realize that we kept putting our relationship on the back burner – the last thing on our to-do list – and we were both okay with that? That’s not the sign of a healthy, flourishing relationship!”

“So – ” Ron swallowed noisily, and his eyes were suspiciously wet. “So, all of the sudden, you’re in love with Harry?” Hermione’s entire body quivered, as if she were physically quelling her instinct to run from the room.

“No,” she replied, her words falling heavily into the tense silence. “No, not all of the sudden. I just – I just didn’t recognize it for what it was.” Ron’s face seemed brittle enough to break. He looked over at Harry.

“And you?” he asked. There was a long silence, before Harry realized that Ron was addressing him. He turned away from the window, facing them, his hands splayed uncomfortably behind him on the window sill.

“I’ve loved her since last summer,” Harry said quietly, looking at Ron, not Hermione. “But she was off-limits. She was with you.”

“You sure didn’t waste any time making a play for her, as soon as she was free,” Ron snapped bitterly. “And what chance would I have, once the Boy Who Lived had declared his feelings?”

Hermione said, “Oh, Ron, don’t!” in a kind of angry sigh. Harry went rigid, and slowly walked across the room until he was standing very close to Ron.

"I am in love with Hermione, and she is in love with me. And it is one of the last good things I have left. My friendship with you is another. I know that none of this is easy or fair, but I don't want this to come between us." Ron backed away from him, until he came in contact with a chair and sat down abruptly.

"I knew," he said slowly. "I knew when the first thing out of your mouth," here he glanced at Hermione, "after we broke up was concern for how Harry would handle our break-up. It was written all over your face in here the night the broadcast about the rally came on. I just – I didn't want to believe that it was true." Ron propped his head up in both hands, looking dazed and bewildered. Hermione thought of Fred's words. It's just another thing in a long list of things that he doesn't want to process.

"Ron?" she said tentatively, clearing her throat to keep her voice from breaking. "Ron, I'm so sorry."

"Don't," he said tiredly, not looking at either of them. "Just... don't. I can't stop you from being together. Somewhere deep inside, I really want you two to be happy, just – just – " not with each other rang in the room, though the phrase remained unspoken. "I'm sorry. I can't do this," he said abruptly, standing suddenly and striding from the room. Hermione and Harry were left to gaze awkwardly at each other in a room that had suddenly become very large and very empty.

"Remus! Remus, come on!" Tonks called, her voice drifting from the gaping maw of the cellar. "We've got to have time to test the wards. It's already past sunset."

"He's coming," Hermione heard Professor McGonagall's soft brogue relay, and felt her insides twist in nervousness. She stood poised on the balls of her feet, in the kitchen, facing the cellar door, waiting for Remus to go down into the tunnel. Fred and Mr. Weasley would ward the far end, while she and Tonks were responsible for the end closest to the house. She looked at Neville and Luna, sharing the kitchen with her in the same kind of frightened anticipation, and smiled slightly. Harry was in the infirmary with Ginny, as were Penelope and Professor McGonagall.

The front door banged open suddenly, and Ron strode into the kitchen, throwing down a package wrapped in waxed paper and twine.

“Oh, you got it! Good!” Hermione breathed, before noting his stiff stance and dwindling away into painful awkwardness. Ron avoided looking at her completely.

“Rare as bloody possible,” he said noncommittally, looking out the window over the sink at the purple twilight. Neville and Luna’s gazes flickered back and forth between them, with barely disguised curiosity, and the silence grew so tense and strained that Hermione finally snatched the bundle of meat from where Ron had dropped it on the counter.

“I’ll take this to Tonks,” she said, in a brittle voice, and disappeared down the stairs to the cellar.

“I’ll come with you,” Neville remarked, off-handedly, and followed her down.

The cellar had a cool packed-earth floor, and was lined floor to ceiling with shelves. Various and sundry boxes, jars, and packing crates lined these. Hermione recognized a few as being brought from the Shop, but many looked ancient enough to have belonged to the same McGonagall forebears that owned the china plates. At the far end of the dimly lit room was a wide metallic lid, somewhat like a manhole cover, propped open. Hermione could see the white-blue glow of wandlight emanating faintly from the hole in the floor.

“Tonks,” she called out. “Ron’s back from the butcher’s.”

“Bring it down,” came Tonks’ faint voice. “Is Remus coming yet?”

Hermione looked uncertainly back over her shoulder. There were footfalls in the kitchen above their heads, and she could hear Ron talking to someone.

"I think so," she called down, and started down the ladder – really just metal rungs stuck into the wall at random intervals – after handing the damp, squelchy package to Neville.

"Wow!" Neville uttered, after they had both reached the bottom, eying the wide, cool, earthen passageway, sloping ever downward toward the sea. "You and Fred did this alone? Impressive!"

"Well, we had our wands," Hermione demurred uncomfortably, thinking of Harry. So far, they had come no closer in determining how to restore his magic to him. Tonks came striding up to them then, taking the meat from Neville, untying it, and placing it near a ratty and worn pile of old blankets that looked as if they belonged in the dustbin.

"I think we've gotten the far end warded up tight. Fred and Arthur were testing it on the other side, and they're going to stay out on the beach tonight... just to make sure that – that everything's okay," Tonks informed them, speaking in her official Auror voice. Hermione couldn't help but notice the shadow of worry in her eyes. The moon-change was never easy for Remus, and if their wards failed, if he somehow got out to the village or even into the house...well, it just did not bear thinking about.

"Are we ready?" came a voice from behind Neville and Hermione, and Tonks' eyes flitted beyond them and lit up.

"I think so. Are you okay?" she asked, her voice brimming with concern. Remus nodded, his eyes never leaving those of the woman he loved.

"I've got the Wolfsbane potion that Hermione and Penelope were so kind as to brew up for me. It should take the edge off the worst of the effects. Did you put up the Silencios?" he asked, and Tonks nodded. "Good," he said in response to her gesture. He looked briefly at Hermione and Neville. "Then you'd better go and get the wards up, and get out of here." He looked pale, but drew himself up, obviously trying to put the best possible face on things. "Who's stationed at the cellar tonight?"

“I am,” Tonks said, stalwartly, as if expecting him to argue. He opened his mouth, as if he would dispute her presence, but said only,

“Nymphadora,” in such a tender tone that Hermione felt as if she were intruding on a very intimate moment, and grew quite uncomfortable. “If anything ... goes wrong, I trust you’ll do what needs to be done.” His eyes were grave, but Tonks met his gaze head on.

“Yes,” she said simply, though her voice was clogged and watery. Remus leaned forward then, and kissed her gently on the lips, before backing up a few paces.

“Remus!” Tonks barked suddenly, and held out her hand. He looked at her questioningly. “I – I need your medallion,” she rasped, almost apologetically. He smiled slightly, and lowered his gaze toward the ground.

“Of course,” he responded, and removed the chain from around his neck, placing it in her palm in a coiled mound of metal. “Go on then. There’s not much time left,” he said, continuing to back down the tunnel, until he was lost to sight around the curve of the wall, as it bent and twisted, serpentine, through the belly of the cliff.

Tonks stood motionless for a moment, her hands in the back pockets of her faded jeans, staring at the spot where Remus had disappeared. Then she sighed, and seemed to shake herself back to the task at hand, because she said briskly.

“Let’s get these wards up.” She and Hermione turned immediately to the task at hand, the wards having been predetermined, and precisely planned out beforehand, with Neville helping out as the occasion arose. He was considerably more adept with his wand than Hermione remembered, and she assumed that this kind of real-world pressure, as opposed to the manufactured pressure of a classroom, helped him to be at his best. They worked carefully, but quickly, conducting their last test of the wards at almost the same time that Ron called down the cellar steps,

“Moon’s up!”

The wards were up about three or four meters from the ladder, and would prevent Remus from proceeding beyond that point. Tonks was planning on keeping watch at the opening in the cellar that led down to the tunnel. The three of them exchanged a couple of well, this is it! glances, and headed for the ladder.

"How's he doing?" Hermione remarked sleepily to Tonks, as the Auror hefted herself back through the trapdoor into the cellar. Tonks shrugged, looking as tired as Hermione felt.

"Couldn't see him; he must be further down the tunnel. That's the drawback to Silencios too. We can't even use our ears to figure out where he is. He's been up toward this end at some point though. The wall's all gashed up." Tonks' face was pensive and worried, as she lowered a troubled gaze onto the trapdoor, clearly thinking about who was beyond it.

"At least we know the wards are holding, then," Hermione said reassuringly, pillowing her chin on her folded arms, where she sat on the cellar stairs.

"True," Tonks conceded. "We do know that." She looked above Hermione's head suddenly, and said, "Hiya, Harry." Hermione turned to look up the stairs, concern immediately stamping itself on her face.

"Harry, what are you doing up?" she asked, as he clomped down the steps slowly, seating himself beside her near the bottom.

"Woke up and couldn't go back to sleep," he hedged. "Why are you up?" he asked, before she could accuse him of having another nightmare.

"I told Tonks I'd stay with her and keep watch," she said simply.

"And I told her she didn't have to," Tonks replied promptly, watching with interest as Harry laced his fingers through Hermione's with feigned casualness. They still didn't put their fledgling relationship on display very often, and never in front of Ron, but somehow the news of it had made its way around the safehouse. What Hermione hoped nobody knew – especially Ron – was that, as of late, she'd been

spending her nights in Harry's bed. So far, it had progressed no further than just that – sleeping – but both had discovered that much of their mutual difficulty sleeping disappeared when they were together.

"I wanted to," Hermione countered. "I can't imagine how hard it must be to – to know – to know that – " she stumbled to a stop, and nodded toward the heavy metal trapdoor. Tonks smiled at her, without actually moving her lips; her eyes just crinkled slightly at the corners. Hermione could feel Harry's gaze on her.

Maybe I do know some of what Tonks is going through, she thought, recalling watching Harry in that cell in the Riddle house.

"How's Remus?" Harry asked Tonks, after a moment. The Auror shrugged.

"We don't really know. The Silencio is keeping us from – " she jerked suddenly toward the trapdoor, tension outlined in every muscle and joint.

"Tonks?" Harry and Hermione said together.

"Did you hear that?" Tonks said quietly, standing to her feet, and drawing her wand, backing toward the stairs. Hermione drew her wand as well, and stepped down to the bottom of the flight of stairs, so that she was in front of Harry.

"Hear what?" Hermione hissed. Her palms felt clammy against the smooth wood of her wand. It was all well and good to flee a werewolf when you had all of Hogwarts grounds to run through and plenty of places to hide, but meeting up with one in a dark cellar was something else altogether.

"It sounded like something brushing against the rungs of – " Tonks never got to finish what she was going to say, because something bumped violently against the trapdoor, causing it to bounce upward and then back down with a clang. They all jumped, and a startled shriek escaped Hermione's lips.

Another clang. The trapdoor bent in the middle. And now Hermione could hear it, the metallic whisper of claws against ladder rungs.

“Harry,” she whispered, out of the side of her mouth, never removing her eyes or her wand from the trapdoor. “Go. Get. Help.”

The trapdoor bounced up and down again. Another blow or two like that, and the entire thing would buckle, Hermione thought. Tonks tried to throw a Colloportus, but the frame of the trapdoor was already too distorted to hold it.

“Damn!” Tonks swore, and Hermione could have sworn that she saw a stream of tears on Tonks’ face, reflected in the glint of light from the attempted spell. Harry hadn’t even made it out of the kitchen, before she and Tonks were barreling up the stairs just behind him.

Clang. Hermione could hear a low, feral snarl, and felt her blood run cold. They slammed the cellar door shut and sealed it.

“That’s not going to hold him for long!” Tonks said, trying to cast some off the cuff wards at the door. Her wand was trembling violently. Hermione looked over her shoulder, but Harry had vanished from the kitchen doorway. She could vaguely hear incoherent shouting, and knew that he was trying to rouse the others.

The cellar door rattled wildly on its hinges, each time seeming to protrude a bit farther from the frame. The Sealing spell was clearly being tested to its limits.

“What about Stupefy?” Harry asked, coming back into the kitchen. Hermione and Tonks both shook their heads. There were thundering footfalls on the stairs that led to the sleeping quarters of the house.

“No ordinary Stupefy’s going to fell a werewolf, Harry,” Hermione replied. “If it could, they wouldn’t be such a threat.” Tonks was still trying to ward the door, but the constant jittery movement of the door was making it difficult. She was murmuring something under her breath that sounded vaguely like,

“Oh God, Remus. Oh God, Remus.”

Professor McGonagall entered the kitchen doorway, with Luna and Neville tumbling in behind, just in time to hear the loud crackling sound of crunching wood. Curved white tips of claws appeared through the painted wood of the cellar door. Neville's eyes were wide and entranced, fixed on the beleaguered door.

"Ron's Apparated down to get Fred and Mr. Weasley," Luna said helpfully, her eyes darkly bright in the pale moonlight streaming through the kitchen window.

Penelope's probably sealed herself and Ginny into the infirmary, Hermione thought, and her eyes drifted unwillingly toward Harry, who had moved when the others entered the kitchen, and was now in between her and the far wall of the kitchen, on which rested the window, sink, and length of counter.

"You shouldn't be here, Harry. You can't – " she began, but faltered. A Stupefy might be nothing more than a Stinging hex to a werewolf, but it was better than nothing at all, which is what Harry had.

"I'm not leaving you," he said stonily. The cellar door quivered and shook, as if it were made of gelatin rather than wood. The low snarl became a roar of rage and challenge, sliding up the octaves into a blood-curdling howl. Hermione thanked Merlin that Silencing spells were part of the ward package that had been present on the safehouse since day one.

"Wands at the ready!" Mr. Weasley called out, entering the kitchen, with Fred and Ron close behind him. "Petrificus on my mark." Wands came up, and faces set like flint with determination.

The door knob rattled loose from its casing, and hit the floor loudly, rolling drunkenly across the kitchen tile, with a metallic swirling sound. Hermione rather imagined that she could see the brilliant flash of razor-sharp incisors through the hole where the door knob had been. The growling was louder now. One hinge tore free from the wooden doorframe.

“Steady as she goes,” Mr. Weasley said in a calming voice. Hermione tried subtly to move in front of Harry, but then a motion on her other side caught her eye. Neville’s trembling sweaty hand clenched around his wand, as he aimed it toward the door.

He’s going to cast early! Hermione thought, panicked. It’s our first broom lesson all over again! She knew they would need every spare particle of magic from each wand if they could even hope to down Remus.

“Neville, no!” she shouted, at the same time that a blast of light shot out of his wand.

There was a tumult of light and sound. A loud crackling issued forth as the door seemed to fold in on itself like tissue paper. Tonks was prostrate on the floor, blood trickling from a laceration somewhere in her hair. Neville, Luna, and Ron were tumbled in the corner like discarded toy soldiers. Mr. Weasley had been hurled across the room, where he had made loud contact with the cabinets beneath the sink, caving in both doors and causing the pipes to spew a fine mist of water across the tile floor. Professor McGonagall had been driven to her knees near the pile of humanity that was the younger Order members, and was slowly trying to get up, looking suddenly every one of her years.

A rank smell of warm and sweaty animal filled the kitchen, permeating both Hermione’s nostrils and her awareness. Claws clacked and slid ominously on the wet tile, as that which had once been Remus Lupin mounted the last stair and entered the kitchen, picking its way carefully through the ruins of the cellar door.

Hermione realized suddenly that she and Harry alone were left standing, and Harry was in between her and the werewolf. It swung its massive muzzle toward them, sniffing the air almost delicately. A low snarl gurgled up from the belly of the beast in anticipation, and rattled around the corners of the kitchen. Mr. Weasley groaned and moved slightly, trying to roust himself from the wet splinters of the cabinet doors.

Harry looked up at the werewolf looming over him, spreading his arms wide to block the creature from going after Hermione.

“Harry, no!” Hermione’s voice cracked, becoming no more than a pleading whisper. She raised her wand. There was a clatter of wood, as someone to her left struggled to find his or her wand again. She closed her eyes in desperation, and felt something surge within her, a thrum of power, a bubbling up of an intense potion. She found herself wishing in vain that Harry had his magic back, figuring that somehow his power would be more than the sum of everyone else’s. If Harry could still do magic, she would not be as utterly petrified as she was at this very moment, staring down the vile maw of a monster. The raw desire of it, seemingly boiled down to its very essence, burned her insides like acid. She was going to explode with the force of it. What the hell is going on?

The werewolf raised one powerful paw, tipped with cruelly curved claws. It was going to knock Harry out of the way, would probably break his neck. Harry held up both hands to ward it off. Oh, God, Harry... Hermione thought.

“Stupefy!” Hermione shouted, so loudly and shrilly that she thought she might have stripped the very lining from her throat. A brilliant beam shot from the tip of her wand, at the same time as corresponding rays of light erupted from the palms of both of Harry’s hands.

The werewolf hovered in mid-air for the briefest fraction of a second, before being propelled down the stairs, where it landed with a sick-sounding thwack on the hard-packed dirt of the cellar floor. Harry leaned over the ruined threshold, peering down the stairs at the prone, crumpled figure in the dimness. He was visibly wavering on his feet. He turned back to Hermione, looking shell-shocked.

“He’s breathing,” he announced. His knees buckled beneath him, and Hermione quickly ducked under his arm, struggling to keep him upright. In the corner, Luna and Ron managed to disentangle themselves. Neville, apparently, was out cold.

“Harry,” Hermione gasped breathlessly. “What on earth was that?”

"I don't know," Harry stammered, looking dazed and at a loss. "I – it – it didn't feel like it came from me. I – I controlled where it went, but I don't know where it came from."

"Try your wand!" she said eagerly, pulling out the wand that he still carried in his back pocket out of habit – and maybe a little denial. She handed it to him expectantly.

"Lumos!" he said suddenly, clearly trying to muster up a confidence that he didn't really feel.

Nothing happened.

"I don't understand," Ron said, addressing them both for the first time in a few days, as he moved in front of them, trying to extricate his dad from under the sink. Luna was helping McGonagall to her feet. "If your magic isn't back, then what the hell just happened." Harry was shaking his head.

"It didn't come from me, didn't start with me." He speared Hermione with a sudden wide-eyed look. "It came from you."

TBC

Argh! That got really long, but I decided not to leave you with a cliffhanger in the middle of the werewolf attack. Aren't I nice?

I had real trouble with this chapter. I liked the end, but it was the beginning and middle that gave me problems. It's very transitional, and I'm having all the "I know where I want to be, but how do I get there from here?" issues.

There was a lot of set up in this chapter, even some that may not be very noticeable, but definitely set up for the solution to Harry's problem, as well as the solution to Ginny's problem. And there was important Neville plot in here as well.

Please leave a review on your way out. I'm rather uncertain about this chapter, and would love some feedback!

Thanks!

Lorien

Chapter Ten: Revelations

Harry and Hermione just stared at each other, wide-eyed, breathing heavily, in the middle of the wrecked kitchen. Behind Harry, water hissed and splattered merrily onto the floor. Ron had moved his father out from the splintered remains of the cabinet, and Hermione vaguely heard him say,

“Adoperio,” to seal off the spraying pipes. Suddenly the kitchen seemed very quiet, a tense, strained, expectant silence broken only by the squelching of Ron’s rubber-soled trainers on the wet floor.

“Wha – what do you mean it came from me?” Hermione asked lamely, stammering a bit, and drawing her fingers through her snarled hair.

Harry felt like a deer in headlights. He was standing loosely, arms limp at his sides, knees relaxed, as if poised for flight. Professor McGonagall was pressing a cool cloth to Tonks’ head. The Auror moaned and stirred. Luna was in the far corner trying to rouse Neville. Mr. Weasley sat up, almost completely sodden from the broken pipes, and rubbed the back of his head ruefully.

“You didn’t feel that?” Harry managed to squeak, feeling like the world had suddenly began to whirl away from him at some breakneck pace, while he was left behind, gaping like a fish.

“No – I mean, yes, of course I did.” Hermione fluttered her hands in the air, as if she were waving away an annoying insect. “It was – ”

“I hate to break up your little party,” Ron tossed the comment over his shoulder, as he gave his dad a hand up. It sounded only slightly sarcastic. “But there’s an unrestrained werewolf at the bottom of the stairs, and I, for one, don’t relish seeing it up here again.”

“Remus!” Tonks gasped suddenly with a great rush of air, sitting up in one abrupt motion. Fred edged to the jagged remains of the cellar door, and peered down.

“Sleeping like a cub,” Fred quipped irreverently. “We’re going to have to get him back in the tunnels, ward this end back up.”

“Do we have time for that?” Hermione asked. “How long will a Stunner last on a werewolf?”

“Seeing as how nobody’s ever Stunned one successfully before...” Ron’s voice was dour. Hermione couldn’t help but wonder if he’d have been this stone-faced if it had been the two of them – rather than her and Harry – whose magic-in-tandem had stopped the werewolf.

“That’s not true,” Hermione interjected preachily, falling back on what she did best. “The White Werewolf of the Highlands was successfully Stunned on New Year’s Eve 1785 – in front a villageful of witnesses.”

“Only after fourteen people cast a Stunner at the same time,” Luna put in, almost apologetically to Hermione, who looked back at her with mild surprise. Her bright blue eyes were inscrutable in the low light of the wrecked kitchen. “Of course, whatever it was that you two just did wasn’t exactly your run-of-the-mill Stunner, so I would guess all bets are off. But I think your spell could probably have brought down a fully-grown Graphorn.”

“What does that mean?” Ron asked, ostensibly speaking to Hermione, but with wary eyes on Luna.

“It means we have no idea how long Remus will stay Stupefied,” Hermione replied glumly. Ron was looking at her now, with an unreadable expression. He heaved a sigh that seemed to well up from his toes, and picked his way through the splayed wooden shards to the stairs.

“Then we’d better hurry, hadn’t we?” he asked laconically. Hermione watched distractedly as his ginger mop of hair disappeared out of her line of vision. After a brief pause, Fred followed. Hermione continued to stare toward the door in chagrin. He would rather take his chances with a Stunned werewolf than stay up here with me and Harry, she thought, somewhat sadly.

“Is she all right?” Harry’s low voice of worry distracted her, as he addressed McGonagall. His brow was wreathed in concern, as he

glanced at Tonks, who was now aware enough of her surroundings to look affronted by the question.

"I'm fine," she replied stiffly, getting to her feet, but obviously trying not to wobble. "Is – is Remus – ?" she asked shakily.

"He's alive," Harry said shamefacedly, looking like he'd just been caught out after-hours at Hogwarts. "Tonks, I – " But she cut him off, not allowing him to apologize.

"Hermione, you and I will need to go down and re-ward the tunnel after Fred and Ron have gotten him down there. Preferably before we repeat this scene." She gestured expansively at the wrecked kitchen.

"But the wards didn't hold last time," Hermione put in, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. "What if they – ?"

"What other choice have we got?" Tonks' face was grim and pale. Professor McGonagall affixed a healing charm to the laceration that marred Tonks' brow, and moved on to Mr. Weasley.

"Arthur, are you all right?" Hermione heard her ask in her gentle burr.

"I'm quite all right, Minerva," Mr. Weasley replied, waving her off. "Look to Neville. He's still out."

"Hello?" came a frail, frightened voice, drifting disembodied down the stairs. "Is everyone okay down there?"

"Merlin's Beard!" Tonks exclaimed. "We've forgotten about Penelope." Hermione and Luna both rushed to the doorway to call up reassurances. "Luna, can you levitate Neville up there?" The blond Ravenclaw nodded, seeming uncharacteristically alert and somber. "Have Penelope look him over, before you Enervate him. I'm not really sure what exactly went on here." Here, her eyes drifted over to Harry and Hermione, who both flushed and looked self-consciously at their shoes. Neither of them even noticed Luna quietly floating Neville from the room.

“Wish we could tell you what happened, Tonks,” Harry muttered, uncomfortably.

“Is your magic returning?” Mr. Weasley asked, hope sparking a light behind his eyes. Hermione wondered how much he’d seen from amid the smashed cabinets and burst pipes. Harry was shaking his head helplessly and shrugging at the same time, indicating that he, too, was at as loss as to what had happened. Hermione regarded him solemnly, thinking of the failed Lumos spell.

“We’d better get down there,” Tonks finally said, jerking her head in the direction of the cellar. Hermione nodded in agreement, but she had not even touched her foot onto the top step leading down, when a shrill, heartrending scream pierced everyone’s ears. For a moment, time seemed suspended, and Hermione flinched to a halt, as Ron’s dazed and lonely face swam into her mind, superimposed over the gaping maw of the werewolf.

Both she and Tonks had looked instantly toward the yawning darkness of the cellar, before realizing that the scream had clearly come from the infirmary. Hermione felt her grip on the viciously gashed banister loosened, as she relaxed slightly. It did not last long, however, as she began to make out words in the hysterical noise.

“Where’s Harry? He said he wouldn’t leave me. Who are you? Please...I need Harry. I need Harry.”

Ginny was awake.

“Why in the name of the Four Founders would Penelope wake her up now?” Tonks muttered with some annoyance. Every line in Harry’s body was alert, his head cocked up toward the doorway, through which the hoarse and despairing cries floated. He shook his head.

“She wouldn’t have. Ginny must have come out of it on her own.” His eyes flickered uncertainly toward Hermione. “Surely, that could be considered progress. Maybe she’s fighting it off.” He sidled toward the door hesitantly, looking back, his worried green eyes clearly seeking some kind of validation.

“Go and help Penelope, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “Ginny needs you. There’s nothing you can do down in the tunnels anyway.” The reminder wasn’t meant to be harsh, but soothing, reassuring him that he didn’t have to feel badly for helping Ginny, that Hermione was glad that he could find some way to contribute, glad for the effect it could have on his self-esteem and well-being. But Harry flinched anyway, nodded once, rather curtly, and moved from the kitchen.

Hermione told herself that she was hurrying down the rickety stairs to help Fred and Ron before Remus recovered from the Stupefy, not so that she would not have to hear Ginny’s screams of terror turn into sobs of relief.

Hermione drifted upstairs after the tunnel had been warded back up. Her mind was whirling, disconcerted, uneasy, even as her body was almost numb with fatigue. She felt frazzled, frantic, adrift in a sea of minutiae that wasn’t forming itself into the clear patterns and easy answers she was used to.

There was something that she was missing. She was sure of it. And the frustration born of this knowledge was likely to keep her sleepless on her mattress, staring impotently at the ceiling. The insomnia, in turn, would not help her find the answers any faster.

Her feet slowed, but did not stop, at the strip of light peeking out from under the infirmary door. She could hear the murmur of low and anxious voices, and it sounded like Ron and Mr. Weasley were both in there with Ginny. She wondered idly where Harry was.

Without really realizing that she was in motion at all, she arrived at the room that she and Luna had been sharing, intent on gathering her toiletries and getting ready for bed, even though she had precious few hours until the sun rose. She was so tired. Her mind felt sluggish, churning through a sodden morass of observations. I need to brush my teeth, she thought.

Luna was perched on the window seat, still in the pajamas she’d blundered down to the kitchen in, bare feet tucked under her. She stared thoughtfully out the window, as the moonlight gilded her long hair bright silver. Hermione paused on the threshold, regarding Luna

for a moment, feeling uncomfortably like she'd interrupted something private. She made an involuntary movement back, as if she would leave the room, but suddenly Luna spoke.

"My mother's been dead almost half my life. But sometimes I think I miss her more...now that he's gone too," was what she said. She did not turn from the window. "You think I'm mental, don't you?" Hermione winced a little, even though the other girl had spoken without rancor.

"Actually, I think it makes sense," she offered, taking a few steps into the room. "Your dad and your mum were a part of each other, and part of you. Now that he's ... gone, it's like the last piece of her has gone as well."

Luna sniffed suddenly and loudly, and Hermione had the panicked thought that she'd overstepped. However, Luna merely resumed her gaze out the window.

"Father always thought that the full moon was a good time to go Snorkack-watching," she said vaguely. "He said that the light would turn their horns all silvery. We must have gone loads of times..." Hermione got the sense that Luna may have forgotten she was even in the room. "Father even learned this charm, where if he flicked his wand a certain way, it would bleat like a Snorkack. It sounded brilliant... you would have guessed it for the real thing. Sometimes, it was so cold. And he would bring cocoa in a thermos, charmed to stay warm. And marshmallows. Sometimes he'd forget his shoes until he was halfway down the front steps on the way to work, but he never forgot to bring marshmallows." She looked back up at Hermione then, and her eyes were fierce and shiny with tears. "We never saw a Snorkack. Never. We heard them sometimes... or thought we did." She snorted a little, and there was a new, cynical note in her voice that Hermione had not heard before. "Maybe you were right, and they don't really exist after all. Maybe Father was wrong."

Something deep inside Hermione twisted painfully. Luna had always thoroughly rubbed her the wrong way, with her dreamy, lackadaisical smile, her penchant for believing things based on erroneous reports and unsubstantiated rumor, and the inherent attitude that things

would work themselves out eventually,. Hermione knew, she knew that to make things happen, one had to work for them, and to be able to work for them, one had to research, study, prepare. Hermione had never taken anything on Faith in her life, and ...until Harry.

Maybe Harry was her Faith, she thought suddenly. Maybe he gave her the ability to have Faith, in the same way that she was his Reason. Maybe that was why they had always felt drawn together, even platonically at first... they were two halves of a whole.

Faith and Knowledge. Seemingly always at odds with each other, but together had the possibility to become something powerful, something more than the sum of its parts. People always say opposites attract, but I don't think that's true, Hermione thought suddenly. Ron and I were opposites, but Harry and I are complements. It's not necessarily the same thing.

"I think he was right," Hermione said softly, and her reply startled them both. Luna looked up at her with surprise. "He was an educated man, wasn't he? Ran a very successful paper? He obviously believed that Snorkacks existed. He must have had a reason to think so. You should trust in that."

"Trust?" Luna's eyebrows soared. "I watched my mother be blown apart by one of her own spells when I was nine years old. She was a Potions master, and even so, her skill did nothing to save her, didn't stop what happened. Father said that everything happens for a reason, and I believed him.

And then the Death Eaters came and killed him." Her last sentence was said in a sad, resigned voice

"Luna – " Hermione said gently, as if beseeching the girl to stop, to not rehash this obviously painful territory just for Hermione's own enlightenment. She didn't have to know.

"The Longbottoms were staying with us," Luna said, leaning her forehead on the cool glass of the window. "There had been some rumors, but even Father couldn't find any foundation for them. But Mrs. Longbottom was nervous, staying alone, remembering what

happened to – to – ” she looked quickly up at Hermione, who nodded, I know. “They blasted their way down the street. You could hear them coming from blocks away. At first, it seemed like they were just destroying things for fun, or trying to flush out a herd of Invisible Wildevarians, but then – somehow – somehow Father figured it out. He knew they were coming for us. They knew that the Longbottoms were there. Knew that – knew – ” she faltered.

“Knew what?” Hermione prodded, fiercely, suddenly desperate to hear the rest of what Luna had to say.

“Knew that we were friends with Harry. Knew who had been in the D.A. Knew who had fought with Harry against Voldemort for three years running,” Luna finished, blinking almost apologetically at Hermione.

“You haven’t – you haven’t told – ” Hermione stammered, feeling sick to her stomach.

“I’ve only told Tonks and Professor Lupin,” Luna said. “I wouldn’t ever tell... tell Harry. I – and neither would Neville.” Hermione nodded at her, almost pathetic with gratitude, and Luna continued. “Father and Mrs. Longbottom put us in a closet. Sealed it up, and masked the entrance. We – Neville and I – were screaming at them to let us help, let us fight. But they – they wouldn’t listen. Father said that – that if anything happened to me – that I – I was so important to him, and to please resp – respect his wishes, and – I’ve never seen Neville so mad. He looked like a Red-Cheeked Warblefox in midsummer. He was pleading with his grandmother, saying that maybe we could make a difference...we’d had training from Harry Potter, after all!” Luna slumped a little on the window seat. “They Stunned us,” she said, anticlimactically, almost wonderingly, as if, even yet, she could not believe that it had ever happened. “When we woke up, and blasted our way out of the closet....it – it was all over.” Hermione found herself reaching out to Luna, laying a gentle hand on the Ravenclaw’s slender shoulder. “The Order found us a couple of days later. You know the rest.”

“And – and your necklace?” Hermione asked, rather inanely, her eyes going to the strand of butterbeer corks threaded through the spindles of Luna’s headboard.

“I’d given it to Father, before... before they shut us in the closet. It must have broken in the fight...I found it on the floor next to – next to him.”

“You used to wear it all the time... at Hogwarts,” Hermione observed, almost fondly. “Why haven’t you repaired it?” Luna slanted a sharp, searching look at her.

“Why haven’t you fixed your watch?” she asked.

Oh. Hermione smiled apologetically and lowered her eyes. This, she could understand. Never forget. Never forget. Every time the lacy smashed crystal of her watch caught her eye, it reminded her that she had nearly lost Harry.

She would not let it happen again.

“Listen, Luna...” Hermione began hesitantly, after a long enough silence that Luna had turned back to stare out of the window again. The blonde turned at the sound of her voice, as if surprised that she remained in the room. “I know this is – I wanted to apologize... for the way you were treated at Hogwarts. People were unfair to you.” I was unfair to you. “It wasn’t right.” Luna’s eyes glinted with amusement.

“You weren’t the one hiding my things or calling me ‘Loony,’” she observed calmly. Hermione noticed that just as Luna had taken for granted that Harry had told her why Luna could see thestrals, she also assumed that he had told her as well how her housemates stole her belongings and hid them.

“But I didn’t – ” make things any easier for you. Hermione floundered.

“I always liked school,” Luna said dreamily. “For one thing, it was an excellent breeding ground for Vein-Winged Gribbleflies. And – well, I always figured Ginny was a shoo-in for Head Girl, but I wouldn’t have minded calling the plays at the Quidditch Games again. That was fun.

I believe Ronald rather liked it.” Hermione stared at her, having completely forgotten that Luna and Ginny would have been starting their seventh year in barely over a month. “It’s a shame we won’t be going back. I wonder if anyone will ever give us our N.E.W.T.s?”

“We have to believe that things will go back to normal eventually... that Light will overcome. If we don’t, then Voldemort’s already won,” Hermione said, Harry’s blazing, determined eyes imprinted in her mind. Luna looked at Hermione archly.

“That doesn’t sound like a very Hermione Granger thing to say.”

“No,” Hermione admitted. “It doesn’t, does it? What would Hermione Granger have said?”

Luna looked at her warily for a moment, before answering thoughtfully,

“Hermione would have calculated our odds for survival and found them lacking. She would have said that there was nothing left to trust in but our own mental acuity and ability to improvise. She would have had a Plan A, B, C, on down to letters that nobody’s ever heard of. She would logically break down every single aspect of every single obstacle facing us. And where would her unwavering faith in and love for a Squib fit logically into that equation?” Hermione couldn’t help but smile at Luna’s accurate assessment, and wondered why she had always assumed that the girl was dim.

“He doesn’t,” Hermione said honestly. “But I think logic is overrated, don’t you?” They exchanged a knowing glance, and Hermione felt surprising warm tendrils of friendship extending toward the Ravenclaw like open arms. She shook her head slightly, wondering under what other circumstances something like that could have possibly happened. She grabbed the bag that she had ventured into the room for, and started to leave, but turned again when a sudden stray thought struck her abruptly. “Luna, when you and Neville were Stunned... who came to first? Was Neville already gone when you woke up?”

Luna betrayed no surprise at this non sequitur, but merely answered calmly, "No, I woke up first. I finally had to throw some water on him to wake him up. He wasn't terribly thrilled about that, but Father had put our wands in the pocket of a coat hanging in the closet." She shrugged. "I didn't see them until I'd already poured the water on his head."

"How was there water in your... closet?" Hermione asked, too puzzled by the story to laugh. Her mind was darting around between various scraps of information. Where's the pattern? There is always a pattern.

"Haven't you ever seen that bottle of mineral water that Neville always has with him? He started it sometime back during last school year, still does it. I always figured he really had Old Ogden's in it or something. Didn't smell like it in the closet though."

Hermione was frowning, all processors churning furiously. She moved toward the door again, more purposefully this time, and called over her shoulder,

"I'm going to shower. Don't wait up for me."

"Tell Harry I said hello," Luna replied, blandly. Hermione jerked her gaze to the girl in the window seat, but Luna was staring out the window, seemingly entranced once again by the moonlit view below. Much as she had with Luna, Hermione paused on the threshold to Harry's room, which somehow managed to look bleaker than the other rooms of the house. Perhaps it was the fact that the only article of furniture in it was the bed. Perhaps it was the fact that there was only one window, and that was high and narrowly set into the far wall. Hermione didn't think that this room had been originally intended as sleeping quarters, and she wondered briefly what its purpose had been.

The door was cracked, and she pushed it open soundlessly, padding across the threshold in sock feet. Harry was sitting on his bed, facing the window, and muttering something under his breath. He looked as if he were shaking something in his right hand, the muscles in his shoulders and back were heaving slightly with movement.

She was on the verge of clearing her throat lightly to announce her presence, when she heard the word that he was repeating over and over again:

“Lumos. Lumos! Lumos!” He was flicking his wand, using sharp, impatient gestures, in much the same way that one might try to extract the contents from the bottom of a bottle of catsup. Hermione felt tiny cracks thread through her heart just before it collapsed into innumerable pieces. Oh, Harry... She hovered uncertainly just inside the room, unsure whether to stay or go.

The Trio had been in mostly accelerated classes during their seventh year, spending most of the time holed up in the Room of Requirement with Remus or Tonks or Bill or Charlie, learning things that normal seventh-years did not necessarily learn. They were given crash courses in field medicine, battle tactics, strategies, Legilimency, and Occlumency, to name but a few. Harry had picked up the mental skills quite easily and quickly, which all but confirmed the fact that Harry’s earlier difficulties had been with Snape himself. Hermione had more trouble with it. She was better at the field medicine and tactics, excelling, as always, in anything that was tangible, anything that you could puzzle down to its simplest components and solve. She supposed that was why she liked Arithmancy so much.

She pondered for a moment what exactly had happened in the kitchen with Remus. She had been standing there, Harry between her and the beast, wishing that there was something that could be done, wishing that he still had his magic. Wishing? No, that wasn’t the right word. Hoping? She wasn’t sure, but... she straightened suddenly, coming alert as a thought occurred to her. Could she have used Legilimency – or some offshoot thereof – inadvertently? Perhaps like the mental images she’d gotten of Harry while he was Voldemort’s captive...that he seemed to have sent to her through that residual link, without even realizing it.

Harry swore, and raised his arm, throwing the useless wand across the room in one smooth motion born of pure fury and frustration. It bounced noisily off of the wall, and clattered across the floor, finally rolling to a smooth stop somewhere beneath the bed.

“Harry?” Hermione finally ventured tentatively. Harry turned sharply, and a look of embarrassment momentarily skittered across his face. Hermione could practically see him thinking, How much of that did she see?

There was a long, awkward silence. Important questions that needed to be asked and heartfelt conversations that needed to be exchanged hovered in the room invisibly, poised, waiting.

“I’m – I’m sorry you had to see...that,” Harry mumbled, gesturing toward the wall where he had hurled his wand. “I lost my temper.”

“You’re the one who told me it was okay to be angry, Harry,” Hermione told him simply.

“I thought – when the light came out of my hands, I thought – ” he stammered, almost incoherently. Hermione was nodding.

“I know.” Her voice was gentle. She could well imagine the sharp spike of elation followed by the despairing plunge when the Lumos spell failed.

“Do you know what happened?” He asked, his voice still halting. She regarded him for a moment, then shook her head helplessly.

“I just – I just remember wishing that – ” She hesitated. Was ‘wishing’ really the right word? She shook her head again, while Harry watched, bemused, not knowing that it was out of irritation at her inability to express herself that she repeated the gesture. “I think – I think I just gave you some of my magic, and you – you did it,” she finally finished lamely, wondering if she looked as bewildered as she felt.

“Hermione, I thought I had made myself clear about anyone giving up their magic for me!” Harry said, worry and anger warring for dominance on his face.

“I don’t think I have less magic now. I just sent you some, and you channeled it through... I think. Professor McGonagall said your

magical structure is still intact. So why couldn't you make use of magic lent you by an outside source?"

"I'm not ... mad," he offered, evidently hearing the hesitance in her tone. "I just – I don't want anything that's got to come about at your expense, that's all."

"Even if it was at my expense, Harry, I'd consider the purchase well worth the price," she answered softly, sitting next to him on the edge of the bed.

"I wouldn't," Harry replied, looking at her with loving, yet apologetic eyes. She leaned into the arch of his arm bracing himself against the mattress and the rest of his body. She closed her eyes, as she felt his cheek rest on the top of her head. "What were you thinking about... when – when – in the kitchen?"

"I was thinking that I'd rather die than stand back and watch you battle him alone. I was thinking that if I only had enough magic to blast him down the stairs, or even if I could somehow knock him backwards – maybe if he fell, then we'd have enough time to – " He stopped and looked at her, when she sat up abruptly and stared at him, with shining eyes, as her mind rapidly began constructing a theory.

"I'd raised my wand. I was going to try to Stun him," she said, an expectant note in her voice, urging him to follow her in her line of thinking.

"And we did both," he said. "What do you think would happen if I used my wand?"

"Why do wizards even use a wand?" Hermione asked rhetorically. "It's to refine and focus the magical output. If you'd used your wand, the spell would have probably been more precise. But it looks like we need to be thinking or feeling in tandem, so that the magic produced is what we want to happen. Imagine if we'd both been thinking about Stunning him!"

"Wait – you think we can do that again?" Harry was incredulous.

“Why not? I’ll need to go down to the War Room. There were a couple of books down there on Magical Transference, but I never looked at it from the aspect of Magical Channeling. Maybe I could find – ” She was already standing, her toiletries spilling across his bed, forgotten. He grabbed her arm just above the elbow, and pulled her back down beside him, and she arched her eyebrows with a questioning smile.

“Harry – ?” It was almost a laughing protest.

“Not right now,” he said succinctly. “It’ll be dawn soon, and you’ve had no sleep at all. You can look in the morning.”

“In the morning, everyone will be preoccupied with what happened to Remus, and us, and Ginny – how is Ginny?” She broke off suddenly to ask.

“She’s okay. Penelope seemed to think that her waking on her own was good, but she still had to be sedated again. A counter-spell could probably be found, but Penelope doesn’t think that anyone here would have the training or power to apply it correctly. The curse is so precise that the counter-spell would have to be equally as precise.” He looked glum, and Hermione reached out to clasp his hand sympathetically.

“I’ve been looking into that too, Harry. You know that as soon as I find anything promising, I’ll –”

“I know, Hermione. Sometimes I think you work harder than anyone else here. But I – I don’t – ”

“Don’t what, Harry?” she asked in a throaty whisper, as he faltered and looked at her uncertainly.

“I don’t want you to lose yourself in all this.” He cupped her jaw lightly, and she leaned her face into his caress. Her eyes slid shut.

“I won’t. Not as long as you’re here,” she whispered. He stretched out on the bed, and pulled her down next to him, shoving her shower

things off of the bed unceremoniously. Her bottle of shampoo rolled nearly the length of the room, before being stopped by one of Harry's shoes. She made a token protest, moving against him in an effort to get up in a way that made him groan and her blush.

"I was going to take a shower," she tried feebly.

"Tomorrow," was his one-word answer, as he bent his knees into the curve of her legs, and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting them lightly on her stomach, temptingly close to the hem of her shirt. He brushed some of her long hair away from the side of her face, and laid a light kiss at the junction of her neck and ear that made her shiver with delight. She felt him smile into the column of her neck, and he kissed her again.

"You're not acting as if you want me to sleep, Mr. Potter!" she teased lightly, the smile falling off of her face, when she felt him suddenly tense behind her. "Harry, what's wrong?" she turned to face him, laying both hands flush on his chest.

"Nothing, just – just – " His face was crimson. "We haven't talked about – about that yet." Her lashes fluttered nervously as she averted her gaze.

"If you don't want to – " she began stiltedly. He put his hand up to her mouth to hush her, shaking his head wildly.

"If you think for even a moment that I don't want this – you, then you're clearly delusional, and in need of more than just a good night's sleep." He said, trying to speak flippantly, though his glowing face and tender eyes gave him away. "It's just – maybe it's not the best time to be beginning something so – so – " important, serious, beautiful, precarious, dangerous, perfect? Hermione mentally filled in the blanks for him.

"I think," she began slowly, speaking seriously and sincerely, in what Harry and Ron liked to call her Earnest Voice, "that there will always be reasons why a relationship isn't wise, no matter what is or isn't going on in the world around people. Relationships take work and love takes work, and those things are always difficult, but always

worth the effort. I think we need this ... closeness. At least, I know I need you, and I want – I want this...us. Someday.”

“Whenever you’d like,” he murmured against her lips, kissing her lingeringly on the mouth. She sighed against his cheek as they broke apart.

“How about your birthday?” The look of shock and hope and excitement and disbelief that battled on his face made her laugh.

“Hermione!” he chided. His birthday was only two days away. Her eyes twinkled with amusement that melted and swirled slowly into tender regard. His eyes grew more serious as well, and Hermione was sure that she could guess his exact thoughts. Hermione, I’m almost eighteen, and I know that the teenage-boy part of me is thrilled that you want this, but I hope you know that it is more than that, has always been more than that, and will always be more than that. You matter to me more than anyone else ever has, or ever will.

I know, Hermione hoped her loving gaze answered back, and I hope you know that this is more than just making the best of a bad situation, more than grabbing at what pleasure we can for fear we may lose everything. I hope you know that somewhere, deep inside, I believe that this would have been happening anyway, just like it is happening now, in spite of everything...

“I love you, Harry. Suddenly, I’m surer of this than I’ve ever been of anything in my life.” His answer was another tender kiss, and then she turned away from him, spooning back into his warmth, as the encroaching tide of sleep swept them both away.

Remus was ensconced in the infirmary bed that had once housed Harry when that former occupant and Hermione cautiously peered in the next morning. Tonks was sitting watchfully at his bedside, while Penelope and Professor McGonagall conferred about something involving two smoking vials of potion at the foot of the bed.

“How is he?” Harry said softly, looking apologetic and shamefaced.

“He’s okay,” Tonks said. “Kind of out of his head right now, he’s on so much bone-knitting elixir. They,” she nodded her head at the two women at the foot of the bed, “aren’t sure whether he can safely have any more, but his arms are still only partially healed.” Her eyes were warm, and she seemed to be trying to absolve him from blame without speaking.

“We didn’t know – it was so strong – we still aren’t sure what happened,” Harry stuttered, as if trying to expiate for what had occurred.

“Nonsense,” Lupin slurred suddenly, fading bruises standing out on his pale face. “Woulda done the same thing myself... if – if you had – had been a, well an’ Tonks would have to – except she’s not – and – ” he stopped, and his eyes closed slowly. Tonks looked up to the two teenagers, with a grin on her face that promised to tease Remus mercilessly about this later, now that she was sure he was going to be okay. Harry and Hermione were not smiling though, feeling absolutely terrible about what their unexpected outburst of magic had done to Remus.

“Listen to me the two of you!” Tonks hissed, in a voice that nevertheless commanded attention from both of them. “You did what needed to be done, and Remus and I are both just grateful that he didn’t hurt anybody and that he’s still alive. What happened to him last night was nothing compared to what he would have done to himself if he had attacked any of us. Do you understand me?” Her voice was stern, and they both found no recourse but to nod meekly. “At least you did something,” she added with chagrin. “I promised him – I said I would be able to handle it, but I didn’t. I couldn’t face the possibility that I’d have to hurt him, maybe even kill him.” She swallowed with difficulty.

“Tonks, everything happened so fast. There was no – ” Hermione began, but Tonks cut her off.

“I hesitated,” she snapped shortly. “If there’s one thing they teach you at Auror training, it’s that you never hesitate. Maybe you screw up, maybe you make a bum call every once in a while, but if you stand there with your mouth open, twiddling your wand, you end up dead.

Who knows what would have happened – if not for you two – because I was incapable of making the necessary decision.”

“It’s not very fair of you to hog all the blame for yourself,” Harry said in a voice that somehow managed to be both light and reproving. “If I’d been in your shoes, knowing that I might have to hurt someone I – ” here his eyes drifted over to Hermione, and he seemed to lose his train of thought. “I don’t know if anyone can be faulted for waiting, hoping that any other option might become available.”

Tonks’ eyes filmed over as she regarded her prone love, and her hand hovered over his, fluttering delicately there without actually touching him.

“I think we could have Stunned him,” Hermione put in, shaking her head slightly. “If Neville hadn’t cast early – but he’s always been a little jumpy. It’s a shame, but who wouldn’t be when facing down a werewolf? I was thinking when I saw him twitch that it was just like first year, when his broom ran away with him.”

“Neville’s gotten so much better lately,” Harry frowned. “I mean at the Ministry fifth year, and when Malfoy let the Death Eaters in last year... and then this year – I mean, somehow he and Luna stayed alive, didn’t they?” Hermione supposed that Harry didn’t know that they had been Stunned in a closet.

“He did manage to get himself lost and Stunned at St. Mungo’s too,” Hermione pointed out thoughtfully, and Harry turned to her, words of confusion dying on his lips unspoken. Penelope approached the head of the bed, and poured one of the debated potions down Remus’ throat.

“We decided he could take a little more,” she murmured softly, “but he really is going to be out after this. He should feel much better when he wakes up.”

Tonks stood then, and ushered them both out of the door, past an only slightly twitching and under sedation Ginny, and down the stairs to the War Room, saying only as they went,

"I suppose we all need to discuss what happened last night... and I think I smelled someone baking pastries." She spoke cheerfully, but Hermione could see the shadows in her eyes, and knew that the Auror hadn't forgotten what she saw as freezing in a moment where action was required.

Hermione and Harry exchanged uncertain glances as they obediently followed Tonks into the War Room. The morning light in the room was low and pleasant, since the room faced west, and there was, indeed, a plate of warm and fragrant pastries on the table, along with the obligatory pot of tea. Mr. Weasley and Fred were hunched over a roll of parchment discussing something intently, while Ron was half-propped in the windowsill, in almost the exact same posture Harry had sported before. Hermione could tell by the way he suddenly went rigid that he was aware of their arrival in the room, but he did not remove his gaze from the window. Luna was seated at the far table, reading something right side up, and absently stirring her tea with her wand, without looking at it.

"Good morning!" Tonks said with a faux brightness that caught everyone's attention. Ron shifted so that his face was pointed toward them, but his eyes were still averted. Tonks helped herself to a pastry, poured herself a cup of tea, and settled at the table with Luna. "Where's Neville?"

"He's still sleeping," Luna said. "I checked on him, but Penelope told me to let him sleep. He had a rather hard knock last night."

Hermione felt extremely self-conscious, the weight of everyone's attention pressing on her, even though no one was really staring. She selected a pastry without looking, and moved toward the table, glancing curiously back at Harry when she saw Ron visibly stiffen from his place in the window.

Harry was fixing her tea. She watched him prepare it exactly as she would, were she doing it herself, and an unseen smile crinkled the corners of her eyes. Almost as if he felt her gaze, he looked up and her, and, though he did not really smile either, something glinted in the green hue of his eyes. She felt her face warm, as she remembered their conversation in bed the night before. Too late, she

remembered Ron, who was staring out the window again, the only betrayal of his knowledge of their interaction a working muscle in his jaw.

“So,” Fred said, conversationally, around a mouthful of flaky bread, “here’s where we dissect the latest freakish thing you did, right Harry?” Harry shifted a little, as he sat, sloshing tea into the saucer. Hermione knew Fred was joking, and knew that Harry knew it as well, but she also knew that he remained uncomfortable with standing out in any way.

“I don’t – ” Harry stammered. “I think – ” he looked helplessly at Hermione, and she suddenly realized that he didn’t want to point a finger at her.

“I channeled my magic to Harry,” she said quickly.

“But it wasn’t permanent?” Mr. Weasley said, obviously thinking of the previous night’s events. “Hermione, that could have been very dangerous. Channeling is not something done lightly. You could have cast away your magic completely.” Hermione’s eyes widened. Harry blanched, and scrabbled for her hand without looking, probably not even cognizant of what he was doing.

“I didn’t know that was even possible,” she squeaked through a tight throat.

“It’s rare,” Tonks admitted, “but it has happened. When you channel power to another wizard, you’ve got to be pretty self-aware in order to be able to call the magic back to yourself.

“So, Hermione pushed it toward me and then pulled it back to herself? Like a yo-yo?” Harry asked tentatively. “Why did her wand fire?” Tonks had apparently gotten an account of what happened from Ron or Luna, because she did not appear surprised at this.

“I think the power probably bled through,” Tonks said thoughtfully. “Since she wasn’t trying to channel?” This was said with raised, querying eyebrows at Hermione, who nodded.

"I was just hoping," she winced again over the inadequate word, "that Harry could have been able to do something. Then I raised my wand to Stun Remus – I couldn't think of anything else to do, I just – I just didn't want to watch Harry – he was defenseless, and I – I – " Her voice hitched a little, and she straightened, remembering who she was with and what she was trying to relate. "The spell came out of Harry's hands at the same time that it came out of my wand," she finished in a precise voice, keeping her emotions under tighter control.

"Then that's why he was blasted down the stairs?" Fred said. "It was like getting hit with three Stunners at once?" Tonks, Mr. Weasley, and Hermione were all shaking their heads in something like bewilderment.

"Not even three Stunners should have been able to tickle Remus," Mr. Weasley said. "Much less knock him down a flight of stairs. It had to – "

"I think Harry amplified it," Hermione interrupted, speaking all in one breath again.

"Without any magic of his own?" Tonks said dubiously. Harry flushed again, and Hermione felt herself grow more than a little annoyed.

"His magical structure is still intact! Professor McGonagall said so! Perhaps Harry's is so inherently powerful that he can enhance magic, whether his or no. Maybe that's why he could cast a Patronus so early!"

"The bottom line is," Mr. Weasley cut in, leaning over the back of his chair, to pat Hermione soothingly on the shoulder, "to figure out how to use this to our advantage, if it's even possible."

"I'd like to try it again," Hermione said, "under more controlled circumstances. Can we cast in tandem? Can we cast different spells at the same time? Can you cast if I've been Petrified?" She grew excited, and she knew her cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glowing. She was surprised when not only Harry's, but Ron's, protests drowned her out.

“I’m not letting you try it again!” Harry said. “I agreed before, but that was before I knew you could lose your magic permanently. You heard what Mr. Weasley said – ”

“ – it’s too dangerous,” Ron interjected, his words intermingled with Harry’s. “If something happens –”

“ – then we’ve two people without magic, and we can’t risk that,” Harry finished.

“Harry, don’t be silly!” Hermione said, sounding aggravated. “This could be our answer. Don’t you see? If – if we can refine this enough then maybe – maybe it would be almost like having your magic back. This could even be a jumping-off point for getting it back. If I can figure out how to enable you to retain some of the – ”

“This is how it starts, mate,” Ron stage-whispered, leaning over toward Harry, using a tone that strove to pretend companionability, but cracked with bitterness and fooled no one. “Just wait until she’s behind a stack of books higher than her head all hours of the day, until you wonder if she still remembers you’re alive. And then, you realize that it’s all for some other bloke, and that you’ll never be first, ever, and – ”

Hermione had stopped talking and was staring at Ron in a kind of humiliated horror. Harry appeared to be torn between anger and apology; his hands were raised to placate, but his emerald eyes glinted with something altogether fiercer.

“Ronald, this is neither the time nor the place,” Mr. Weasley put in, with as stern a tone as Hermione had ever seen him use.

“When is it, then? When, Dad? When You Know Who’s come back and killed us all?” Ron’s voice was clogged and hoarse with tears. Hermione flinched. It had been a long time since Ron had been afraid to say Voldemort’s name. “No matter what happened, no matter who – who d – died... I tried to remind myself that as long as you were alive, things might be okay,” he looked at Hermione then, but his glance swiftly moved to Harry. “I was so glad when she brought you back alive.” His use of the past tense nearly tore Hermione apart. “I

thought we had a fighting chance, maybe there was still something left worth giving up everything for – since my best friends were here, would always be here... the ones that I loved most.”

He appeared to have forgotten anyone was even in the room with him at all, as the others merely watched him in a stricken silence. Harry had tried to surreptitiously distance himself from Hermione. Luna was watching Ron with wide, tear-filled eyes, her wand protruding, forgotten, from her tepid tea. Mr. Weasley was rigid, as if physically restraining himself, so that his son could perhaps purge this ire from his system.

“But you weren’t ever with me, were you? Not really. You said that we both put the relationship on the back-burner and were okay with it. But I wasn’t! You never bothered to find out how I felt about it. How could I tell you how I felt about it?” He was addressing Hermione again. “It was because of him. How am I supposed to fight that – you – him? I can’t!” He seemed to suddenly realize he had an audience, and slumped, muttering only a broken, repeated, “I can’t.”

“Listen...whatever problems you three are having – they’re going to have to either be put aside or worked out. If you can’t do that, then none of you are of any use at all to this Order.” Tonks was in full-on Auror mode. Hermione and Harry visibly winced. Ron was staring stonily at his shoes. “I’m truly sorry that you are having to go through this – that you aren’t even allowed normal time to go through normal teenaged problems, to say nothing of the War going on. But we can not do this now. We can not fracture from within. You three are still going to have to be able to count on each other – and everyone in this room, in this house – put your very lives in each other’s hands, just like you’ve done for the last seven years. Are you going to be able to do that?”

“Of course,” Harry said promptly. Hermione was eying Ron with something like pain in her eyes, and her reply was a beat later than Harry’s.

“Ron?” Tonks questioned.

“Ron, if you need us to – if you’re not comfortable with this, then we’ll – ” Harry began, while Hermione looked at him with undisguised alarm. Ron jerked his head up, and leveled Harry with an angry gaze.

“Do not patronize me,” he said clearly. “Do you think it matters now? If you promise to stay away from each other, do you think it makes any difference? It won’t change the way you feel. It won’t make me forget...anything...” He took a deep breath, and swung his gaze toward Tonks, his head pivoting heavily on his neck. “I can work with the Order, Tonks. I can even work with them, fight for them. But civility is all I’m going to be able to manage, thanks.” He looked at Harry and Hermione again, and Hermione was struck by the fact that, more than being angry, he seemed broken. His face was blank, and his eyes were the eyes of someone that she had never met. “Friendship is out of the question.”

He strode from the room in complete silence. Hermione made an involuntary move to follow him, but was stopped by Tonks and Harry.

“Let him go,” the Auror murmured softly.

There was a scuffle outside the room, and Professor McGonagall strode in, evidently having nearly been knocked down by Ron in his flight from what his life had become. Her eyes flickered coolly over the occupants in the room, and seemed to assess the situation in only a heartbeat of time. But then her brow crinkled in slight puzzlement.

“Where on earth is Miss Clearwater?”

“She was in the infirmary with you,” Tonks pointed out rather obviously, looking confused.

“She came downstairs several minutes ago, said she was going sit in on the meeting and would be back afterwards, if I’d keep an eye on Miss Weasley and Remus.”

The Order members stood to their feet nearly as one, all shocked into silence by Penelope’s obvious lies, and the danger implied thereby. Fred was shaking his head.

"I knew it. I knew all along that she was hiding something... I – " The front door opened and shut softly, and Fred propelled out of the room, wand out.

"Fred!" Mr. Weasley and Tonks shouted in alarm, bolting out of the door, followed by the others in the Order. Penelope was cowering against the front door, looking disheveled and panicky, her face streaked with tears.

"Who have you been talking to?" Fred asked, looking deadly serious. "What did you tell them?"

"No, please," Penelope said, "I haven't betrayed you. I couldn't, but I – "

"If you've nothing to hide, then tell us where you were." Hermione eyed Fred carefully. His voice was angry and hard.

"You don't understand. He didn't want me to say anything... yet," Penelope cringed.

"Who!" Fred roared, earning a remonstrance from Tonks.

"He's gone – he's gone," she moaned, sinking to her knees, and rocking herself slightly on the floor. "I've been taking him food, but today, the place was ransacked, and he was gone. They've taken him. They've taken him."

It was Harry, oddly enough, who first cottoned on to what Penelope meant.

"Percy," he said quietly. Penelope looked up to him, startled, but swallowed noisily and nodded.

"You've been hiding Percy... all this time?" Mr. Weasley said in a dazed voice, looking like his legs might not support him any longer. Hermione moved to his side, just in case.

“I begged him to let me tell you. I told him that you would be overjoyed to find that he was alive, but he wouldn’t let me tell. He was afraid that you wouldn’t accept him. And I think – I think he was too proud. He – he was ashamed.”

“Where was he?” Fred asked hoarsely, his wand now by his side.

“In an alley near Gringotts. We rigged a kind of shed back there, cast some masking and shielding charms around it. It was really awful... smelly and hot, garbage everywhere. But when I went just now, it was completely destroyed, and Percy was gone. There were marks of spellfire on the walls.”

There was a moment of silence. Penelope stood with her hands clasped in supplication, looking intently at her feet. Mr. Weasley scrubbed an open hand over his face, seeming impossibly old and tired.

“Where do you think they took him?”

“The rally.” It was Harry who spoke again, his voice falling heavily and portentously into the foyer. “They’ve taken him for the rally.” No one even ventured a guess as to how he was so sure; no one wanted to even wonder whether or not he was still getting flashes of insight from Voldemort himself. The guilt stamped plainly across his face was almost too much for Hermione to bear. Penelope looked at him with large, wet eyes, and tried to bite back sobs. Everyone knew what that meant.

“How do we get him back?” Fred surprised everyone in the room by asking.

“It’s not possible,” Tonks said slowly, flicking apologetic eyes toward Mr. Weasley. “That rally is going to be a breeding place for Death Eaters. And they’re all going to be watching for us, expecting something.”

“So, we’re just going to let Percy die?” Everyone in the room winced at the baldly spoken words.

“Fred, we could get everyone in this room killed, and still not save Percy.”

“Hermione, tell her. We could try. We could use your Portkeys... the medallions. You got Harry right out from under Voldemort’s nose.” Fred had a desperate, pleading look in his eyes. Hermione could hear his thoughts as clearly as if he’d shouted. Not another brother, please. I can’t lose another brother. Even one such as Percy, she supposed.

“Fred, that was – different. There were just a few Death Eaters there. At the rally, there’ll be thousands. Wards up. They’ll be looking for us. Voldemort all but called Harry out over the Wireless.” Hermione looked at him sorrowfully, as if apologizing for not backing him up.

“If our people were to be captured at that rally, they’d be tortured for information,” Tonks added. “It’s simply too big of a risk.”

“And I thought that’s why we decided a long time ago that Remus wasn’t going on any more missions,” Fred said stubbornly. “As long as he stays here, no one can give away the location of this house. When are we going to actually fight? Is our long-term plan to just hole up in this house, while the rest of the world goes to hell outside?”

Hermione looked longingly at Harry, privately thinking that that really wasn’t a bad idea.

“There’s a difference between a fight and suicide!” Tonks argued patiently. “In sheer numbers, there is no way we can break up that rally without being completely overcome. In the end, they’ll have gotten even more of their trophy deaths, and we’ll be worse off than we ever thought about being before!”

“What if we went to the rally just to infiltrate it?” Mr. Weasley spoke up suddenly. “If a couple of us went in disguise, who knows what kind of intelligence we could overhear?” Tonks looked dubious. “I know it may not be possible to – to rescue Percy, but – but at least I could say – I could say good-bye... to my son.”

There was a strangled sort of noise from Harry, and Hermione felt tears sting her eyes. Tonks looked unhappy with his request, but also like she was not far from crying herself.

What she had been about to say was interrupted, by a shuffling noise from the door of the War Room. Luna stood, framed in the doorway, a small Muggle radio in her hand and an earpiece in one ear. Hermione noted with some alarm, that the normally placid girl was gripping the edge of the doorframe so tightly that her knuckles were white.

"He's done it," Luna said in a tremulous voice.

"Who's done what?" Tonks asked with trepidation, as Hermione exchanged a look with Harry. His eyes were wide and blank, and filled with that same horror that she had seen on his face in her visions of his captivity. Please, not again...oh please.

"Muggle radio reports that Godric's Hollow and Ottery St. Catchpole have been completely destroyed. There are unconfirmed reports that it might have been from some kind of large-scale gas explosion, but they've no explanation as to how it occurred in two completely different locations at nearly the same time. No survivors." Luna tried to keep her voice impartial, but didn't quite achieve it.

"Then it has begun," Harry said hoarsely, looking helplessly at Hermione.

"All right," Tonks said, turning to Mr. Weasley with a grim look. "How many people do you think you'll need?"

TBC

Okay...more setup. I'm not terribly happy with this chapter, but it was necessary to get to the next chapter, which should have the scenes from the rally and Harry's birthday.

Hopefully, some of you liked it, because I'm not really sure I did.

Thanks for reading all the same, and you may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Eleven: Rally

Light fingers skimmed over his skin, and she watched him from her position, propped up on pillows in his bed, reading a manual about Cooperative Spell-Casting by wandlight. He was folded up under the covers, facing away from her, breathing irregular enough to make her think that he was not yet asleep.

Another stroke, up the length of his arm, the pads of her fingers barely touching him. She chewed on her lower lip and watched him pensively, as he turned over toward her, regarding her owlshly. The blue-white light glowing from her wand cast his face into planes and shadows.

"Can't sleep?" she asked lightly, not quite able to meet his eyes. She was grateful that he didn't bring up the patently obvious fact that she had been the one to disturb him.

"Not well," he admitted. "I keep thinking about what's going to happen in the morning. That rally – I – I don't want you to go."

"I need to do this," she murmured quietly, pulling her arm away from him and folding her hands neatly on her knees.

"No, you don't," he countered, just as softly.

"Mr. Weasley needs me. He – "

"He has Ron and Fred!" Harry interrupted, and Hermione felt the heat of anger begin to rise within her.

"Tonks says I'm the best spellcaster we have. He needs me. We don't know what we're getting into out there. We've got the ward detectors, the medallions, and the – the other Things – " she offered doubtfully, and Harry shifted uncomfortably in the bed at the vague mention. She knew that he didn't really approve of her even dabbling in such Art. "And the portkeys – " she added hastily, to divert his attention from her previous words. "I've made some modifications that may help it be untraceable – but there could still be detectors detecting our gear, and we just don't – and I've – I've just got to – "

he's been like a father to me over the last year. You should know that as well as anybody."

"Tonks is the damned Auror. And a Metamorphmagus too. Let her go."

"She is going," Hermione said, her patience wearing thin.

"Then let me go with you," he said, staring at her so pleadingly that she averted her eyes and swore under her breath.

"You can't go, Harry! And you know why you can't."

"Dammit, Hermione!" Harry's voice was unadulterated frustration. "You do realize that you are most likely number two on Voldemort's hit list? None of the others – he – you've embarrassed him, humiliated him on his own turf, in front of people who worship him. Do you think – do you really think – he'd be content with only killing you?"

She scooted down under the covers, so her head was closer to his, and smiled a rather watery smile at him.

"He's going to have to catch me first." Her words were so confidently spoken that they must have shot to Harry's heart, for she saw his jaw clench and his eyes fill.

"If anything happens to you..." was all he could choke out. She merely nodded at him, I know. She would make no promises, no empty assurances that she would be just fine, thank-you-very-much. They both knew the precariousness of the tightrope on which they walked, below which lay the Shadow of Death. Hermione saw the disagreement in his eyes, but it was soon submerged under resignation. He knew he could not talk her out of this, and she wasn't sure what upset him more, that she was risking her life, or that she was going somewhere that he could not follow.

"So, you couldn't sleep either?" he asked, trying to sound normal after reining in some of his emotion, indicating her lit wand and the open book.

“No, I – I was just doing a little research... and waiting...” He propped up on his elbow and looked at her curiously.

“Waiting for what?”

“Waiting for you,” she said, trying not to look nervous, as her heart sped to frightened-rabbit levels in her chest. She flicked her wand with a murmured word, and the glowing numbers 12:04 hovered before them in translucent blue.

She closed the book and set it gently on the bedside table, murmuring another hasty spell, before laying aside her wand as well. By then, the blue numbers had faded away, and Harry had that look of partial comprehension, where one does not want to actually voice one’s hopes and be proven incorrect. She hoped that she cleared away any further doubt from his conscious mind when she slid closer to him in the bed and said throatily,

“Happy Birthday, Harry.”

He stared at her for a long moment, as if he were trying to memorize her face, trying to stamp this exact moment indelibly into his memory. Then, with the lightning-quick reflexes that made him arguably the best Seeker Hogwarts had seen in a hundred years, he pulled her forward so that her warm, lithe form was flush against him. Their lips met, tentatively at first, and then with more confidence and slowly building passion.

Hermione was much more anxious about the following day than she would allow herself to admit to Harry, and she found herself clinging desperately to every sensation, to his warm, supple body entwined with hers. This was Harry...this was here...this was now... and for a moment, at least, she wanted to forget everything else, wanted to forget the countless people who had been sacrificed on the altar of Voldemort’s power, wanted to forget Ron and his sad, broken, angry face, his struggle to cope with the torment that life had thrust upon him, wanted to forget Ginny and her wide, unseeing eyes, her frantic hands clutching at Harry as if he were her lifeline. She wanted to forget about the morrow, about being surrounded by hostile Death

Eaters, about having to watch more fighters for the Light die, and probably being unable to save them.

Harry was here and now and....Oh, God... Rational thought was beating a hasty retreat. His hands roamed southward, as their lips continued their battle for supremacy. His fingers skimmed skin, as they reached the place where her tank top and sleep pants did not quite meet. He twined his questing fingers into the hem of her shirt, urging it upward ever so slightly.

He paused in his delicious plundering of her lips, and looked at her with some anxiety, eyes slightly glazed and breaths coming in short pants.

"Are you sure – really sure?" he asked, his gaze pleading with her to say yes. She nodded, lips pressed tightly together.

"I'm sure," she said breathily.

"Was that spell – ?"

"Yes, Harry," she interjected with ill-concealed exasperation. He grinned at her unrepentantly, and she blushed.

When their lips met again, there was nothing tentative about it. It was blinding, soul-searing, mind-blowing, and Hermione was stunned to feel desire thrum through her like electric current. He was so warm, his skin seeming to radiate heat beneath his t-shirt and flannel pants, and she suddenly and desperately wanted more skin-to-skin contact so that she could feel more of that alluring warmth. Her fingers crept under his t-shirt, to come into contact with the smooth skin of his abdomen; she felt the muscles twitch reflexively under her hands.

She felt the ridged line of a recently healed wound, and knew instinctively that it had to have come from his stay with Voldemort. She hesitated, as the reality flooded back once again. His mouth had begun to lavish attention down the side of her neck and along the length of her collarbone, and one hand had begun to pull aside the strap of her tank top, but he stopped when she did.

“What’s wrong, Hermione?” he asked gently, obviously trying to keep the disappointed look out of his eyes. He thinks I’ve changed my mind, Hermione noted.

Her fingers found the scar under his shirt again, and traced it softly, causing Harry to hiss air out through his teeth, though it was a sound of desire rather than pain.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” she blurted, not really sure of what she actually meant.

“That is not going to hurt me,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice. He had been healed for weeks, and she knew it.

“It hurts me...” she finally admitted, not meeting his eyes. “When I think of what he did to you... has done to you...since before you could even remember...”

“And you saved me,” he said in a muffled voice, burying his face in her neck and nuzzling her in a way that made her arch her neck toward him without even realizing it. “You’ve saved me on so many occasions...in every way that a person can possibly be saved.” The strap of the tank top slid the rest of the way off of her shoulder. He looked at her searchingly, his green eyes blazing with pent-up desire, and she felt the echo of it rush through her, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. “Save me again, Hermione...my Hermione...”

And Hermione understood. It was a plea to pretend to forget, just for a little while, just as she’d been trying to do, while recognizing the fact that neither of them could ever really forget. She let her hands surge up under his shirt again, her fingers playing over the planes of his chest for a moment, before she withdrew them and pulled the shirt over his head in one smooth motion. She never broke eye contact with him, even as she slithered out of her tank top, and they soon made short work of the rest of their clothing as well.

Few words were spoken; few words were needed, beyond the guttural moans, grunts, and hisses that conveyed their meanings far more efficiently than mere words could. Hermione’s wand remained lit, and its blue-white glow bathed their skins in a silvery sheen.

They made love first with the awkward hesitance that comes with unfamiliarity, and for awhile the only noise was Harry apologizing incoherently into her hair, as she rode out the wave of pain, which finally morphed into a more pulsing and pleasurable sensation. The second time, it was with a sense of frantic urgency. They knew that the deck was stacked against them, they knew the danger Hermione would be in tomorrow, and as the real world threatened to crash back in on them, Hermione slid desperately against him, wanted to remember all of it, the feel of his hands, his mouth, his body moving in synchronized rhythm with hers.

How could she have ever imagined that what she had felt for Ron was love? Hermione thought distractedly, as she flew with Harry over the delightful precipice. It was shallow, self-absorbed water to Harry's heady wine. She wound her arms around his neck, as he collapsed on top of her, trembling, and ran her fingers through his damp hair. Momentary sadness stabbed her as she thought of Ron, only to be replaced by a fierce protectiveness. I won't let anyone take this away from me, from him – not Ron, not Voldemort, not anyone.

She waited a moment, waited for their rapid breathing to slow, before pressing a gentle kiss to his temple.

"I love you, Harry," she whispered, with all the solemnity of a sacred vow. Indeed, the entire night had had that feel, as though they'd exchanged vows in Hogwarts' Great Hall with Dumbledore officiating, rather than just shagged in a back bedroom with a Silencio charm up. But it's more than that, Hermione thought vaguely, it's always been more than that.

"I love you too," he replied hoarsely, "My Hermione," he repeated fiercely, and she wondered how much of her inner monologue he had been thinking as well. She smiled at the label, loving the cadence of it as it tumbled gracefully from his tongue. They lay there together, entwined, a moment longer, savoring life distilled down to its very essence.

"You should sleep. You've got to –" Harry began reluctantly, a moment later. Hermione hushed him, pressing two fingertips to his

lips, not wanting the taint of tomorrow to ruin this moment of – it seemed incongruous to say sanctity, given their actions – but Hermione hugged the precious memory to herself, not wanting it besmirched with any inkling of death or Darkness.

He regarded her seriously, and she knew he understood, words notwithstanding. She curled into his embrace, reveling momentarily in the slight soreness, and arranged his limbs around her like a blanket. He's so warm! She felt the rumble of his chuckle in his chest under her cheek, and felt the soft press of lips to the top of her head.

They slept.

Most of the occupants of the safehouse milled tensely around the front hall early the next morning. Faces were grim, words were clipped and terse, often muttered, and eyes were distant and bleak. The ones going on the venture were cloaked in black, knapsacks hidden beneath, and all – except Tonks – bore some form of Glamour charm, subtly changing the features of their hair and faces. Hermione's hair was straight and a nondescript sandy brown, pulled back in a serviceable, but not particularly attractive braid. The brilliance of the Weasleys' hair had been dimmed, and Fred had seemed to enjoy himself by adding several stones onto Ron's lanky frame. Tonks had aged herself by over a decade, and streaked her dark hair with gray. Ideally, the contingent from the Order wanted to attract no attention at all; with black cloaks and plain appearances, they hoped to escape most notice altogether.

Remus had come downstairs with the aid of a cane, his left arm still in a sling. Hermione noted that he and Tonks looked as tense and downcast as she and Harry felt. McGonagall hovered in the doorway of the kitchen, looking pensive and uncertain, and Luna watched Ron with slightly sad eyes, twirling her wand through her fingers like a baton. Neville and Penelope were proceeding down the stairs.

Hermione was standing by Harry, who was endeavoring to look like he'd not lost his last friend, and she turned to him quickly when she saw the other Gryffindor approach.

"Harry, can you do something for me?" she asked in a low voice.

“Again?” he tried to joke, and she glared at him, though faint humor managed to glint in her eyes.

“Keep an eye on Neville,” she hissed, watching their clumsy housemate take up a position opposite McGonagall, his eyes moving over the assemblage with a kind of detached interest.

“Neville?” Harry blurted in disbelief, more loudly than he meant to. Hermione winced, and he muttered a hasty apology, adding more quietly, “Why?”

“I – I’m not sure why... yet. Just please, please just know – know what he’s doing. And don’t let him know. Okay?” Her eyes darted over his face anxiously, as she awaited his affirmative response. “And put this in his drink,” she added in one breath, pressing a small glass vial into his hand. Harry transferred it into the pocket of his jeans in one smooth motion, before asking,

“What is it, Hermione?” She really did not want to tell him, but she reluctantly whispered,

“It’s for Polyjuice detection.” Her eyes flashed a golden amber then, as if daring him to tease her for being paranoid. But it was not mockery that she saw in Harry’s gaze, but fear.

“You – you think Neville is – is not Neville?” he asked, and she felt a momentary flash of gratification that he believed her almost without question – or at least believed in the reasoning that had brought her to this point. “But – but Remus – he checked everybody.” Hermione slid closer to Harry, mindful of the eyes that might be marking their conversation, and with her lips nearly brushing his ear, said almost inaudibly,

“Did he check McGonagall’s team after the St. Mungo’s raid? Neville was separated from everyone, remember?”

“But the – the Fidelius – it – he couldn’t – ” Harry was floundering, looking as disappointed and flummoxed as a child who’d just been told that there is, in fact, no Father Christmas after all.

"I don't know, Harry," she admitted. "I thought maybe since he was Stunned when he came in, but – anyway, it's just a theory. Don't let him know."

"All right," he conceded, and she watched a different look steal over his features, a look of business-like determination. I'm going to do something for the Order, something that doesn't involved stirring stew or picking cucumbers, she could practically see him thinking triumphantly.

Hermione gaze shot over to Tonks and Mr. Weasley, who were just rolling up a detailed map of the area immediately surrounding the Ministry. She and Harry exchanged glances, and he brushed a light kiss over the hair just behind her temple, ever mindful of Ron's baleful eye.

"Are you going to tell them? About the – ?" he nodded in the direction of her arm, which was folded up to her shoulder, clutching at the strap of her knapsack, concealed beneath her voluminous cloak.

"I guess," she said uncertainly. "If I'd only had more – I just figured it out yesterday... I'm not even sure it will work." She met his eyes again, almost guiltily. "They're not going to like it."

"I didn't like it either," he admitted evenly. "You need to tell them." She sighed, seemed to take a moment to compose herself, and stepped forward into the center of the front hallway, lightly clearing her throat.

"I've – I've got something else that might help us today," she said awkwardly, her voice starting out at a much higher timbre than it normally sounded.

"Brilliant!" Fred enthused, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. "What is it?" Hermione closed her eyes briefly, as if in pain, and abruptly yanked upward the sleeve of her cloak, as well as the shirt beneath it, revealing a hideous depiction of a skull with a snake protruding from its mouth on her fair skin, the dark ink making it all the more jarring.

She barely heard Ron's whispered ejaculation,

"Bloody hell."

"Hermione, what did you do?" Tonks asked in disbelief. The adults in the room had almost instinctively recoiled away from her at the sight of that Mark.

"It's – it's not real," Hermione said, somewhat inanely. "But it – it does have a magical signature... I – I copied it from Dumbledore's pensieve memories of Barty Crouch, Jr." Harry had found it in Dumbledore's office after his death; it was chock full of memories that the Headmaster had selected for one reason or another, almost as if he knew his demise was imminent. It had been left to Harry in Dumbledore's will, and had been safeguarded at the Shop until the move to the safehouse was made. Hermione had been agonizing over how to make the Mark more than just a tattoo, telling no one save Harry what she was trying to do, until yesterday, in a burst of inspiration, she had thought that surely one of Dumbledore's memories contained someone wearing the Dark Mark. "It's not permanent, and it isn't connected to the others. It certainly won't stand up to any intense scrutiny, but –"

"But it just might get us through those wards at the rally," Tonks finished for her triumphantly. "Hermione, you really are the brightest witch of your age." Their previous plan had been to enter the Ministry the same way Arthur had escaped, and come into the rally from the other side, hoping that it would not be too heavily guarded. Fred's pack was filled with gizmos from the Wheezes, in case a diversion became necessary.

"It's not a less risky plan," Hermione said in chagrin, shaking her head. "If they don't work, we'll be completely compromised right out of the gate." There's no way we'll escape, is what she did not add.

"It's a better plan," Tonks insisted. "If we come right in the front, we'll be more likely to be accepted, than if they catch us slinking around back Ministry corridors."

“If we get held up at the checkpoint – ”

“One person should go first,” Fred said, interrupting Hermione. “If the Mark doesn’t work, I can use our stuff to distract everyone, while the person in question uses his or her medallion to get away. That way, no one else will be compromised. But we’ll have to abort the plan.” The last sentence was said regretfully, and most of the Order nodded solemnly, as if that went without saying.

“I’ll go first then,” Tonks said, with a resolute look on her face. Remus opened his mouth to object, but closed it again without speaking, as Tonks’ eyes flashed warningly in his direction. She rolled up her sleeve, and presented her arm to Hermione. “I’m a Metamorphmagus, after all. If I get caught at the gate, I’ll have the best chance of slipping into the crowd unnoticed. While a bunch of Weasley fireworks go off, of course.” She tilted her head saucily toward Fred.

“Infuscare Macula Simulatus,” Hermione intoned carefully, tapping the tip of her wand on the tender flesh of Tonks’ forearm. A laser-fine beam of light began to swiftly etch the Mark on the skin beneath. Tonks watched with a kind of wide-eyed and morbid fascination, as the dreaded Mark of Morsmordre appeared on her arm. The Weasleys positioned themselves behind her, to have their arms Marked as well. Ron went last, and Hermione could see his arm tremble almost convulsively when the tip of her wand touched him. She did not meet his eyes.

“For the love of Merlin, all of you be careful,” Remus finally said, as his eyes caressed Tonks’ face lingeringly. Hermione could feel the weight of Harry’s gaze on her, and she turned toward him, her heart in her eyes. He reached out with one hand, and gently stroked the tips of her fingers with the tips of his, barely a touch. As the rest of the Order filed out of the front door, Hermione backed away, her eyes not leaving Harry’s, until she had to turn and navigate her way down the front steps.

The last thing she saw, as they crossed the anti-Apparation wards and popped away, was Harry standing on the front steps, leaning disconsolately against a support post, one hand raised slightly in farewell.

The Order members arrived in a dank alley only a block or so away from the dilapidated-looking building that housed the Ministry. Tonks raised her head as if sniffing the air, and said,

“They’ve put up Muggle-repelling charms. I guess they’ve decided to do that rather than pile everyone through that callbox,” she said. “That makes it easier for us, then. Stay here. I’ll buzz you when I’m safely through.” Hermione fingered her D.A. coin in her pocket, and nodded. With a decided air of unconcern, Tonks sashayed from the mouth of the alley, and disappeared out of sight.

More people crossed in front of the alley, and the Order moved further back into the dimness, the smell of refuse very nearly overpowering. It was a dreary, sullen day, and the lead-gray sky seemed filled with portents of doom, made worse by the unmoving air and oppressive heat.

Hermione pulled the galleon out of her pocket, and held it up in front of her face,

“Come on, Tonks, come on, come on,” she muttered to herself, as if encouragement alone would help Tonks through the gate. The coin threatened to slide in her sweat-slick grasp, and she suddenly felt very hot in her black wizarding robes. Fred was crouched opposite her, drumming his fingers very lightly against the side of a dustbin, and Mr. Weasley looked distant and somber. Hermione figured that his eyes were seeing faraway pictures of lively little red-headed sprites gamboling about on the front lawn of the Burrow, while a slender, pretty, ginger haired woman in an apron, with flour on her hands, admonished them from an open window. Ron was next to her, though over an arms’ length away, and he looked tense and worried, like he was about to be sick.

“You’re not going to fool anyone looking like that,” Hermione chided him from the side of her mouth.

“Pardon me if I don’t have a lot of experience pulling the wool over people’s eyes,” Ron said snidely, his implication clear.

“Ronald, this time it could get you killed! And you told Tonks you could work with me – with us! If you can’t do that, I’ll Banish you back to the safehouse so fast that your head will spin. And don’t think I can’t.” Ron didn’t look like he thought she couldn’t. “We are going to a celebration. You’re going to have to look happy – at least as happy as these people ever get anyway. Can you do that?”

“I can handle it, Hermione,” Ron said in a sullen voice.

“Good,” she replied sternly, with a tone in her voice meant to convey that they would finish this conversation at another time. The galleon warmed and then vibrated in her hands, and Hermione hastily tucked it back into her pocket.

“She’s done it! She’s made it through!” Hermione hissed, and the others stood to their feet. Moving wraith-like, they issued from the alley, and merged in with the foot traffic that, even in Muggle London, was nearly entirely cloaked in black. By the time they reached the entrance, Hermione could almost feel the pulse of power from the Confunding charms on the place. No Muggle would get within a kilometer of the place without suddenly remembering the jumper they’d left at home or a dentist’s appointment they’d forgotten. Hermione wondered absently why that was...Voldemort always seemed to enjoy Muggle sport, and might welcome of slew of Muggles that he could kill right there on the dais. Perhaps he was saving that for another occasion.

There appeared to be two entrances, one for those with the Mark, and one for those without. The ones without a Mark were being thoroughly screened for magical devices before being allowed to enter – or before being carted away screaming, depending on what was found. Hermione breathed a sigh of relief; she had cast Masking spells on her bag, to hide the portkeys and ward detectors from inspection, but she had been unsure as to their effectiveness.

Casting one quick nervous look at the Weasleys, she stepped into the line for those with the Mark. It shuffled forward at a slow, but steady pace, and Hermione again marveled at the sheer number of Death Eaters, at the sea of black around her. How are there so many? She wondered, not for the first time.

A painfully thin wizard, with a beaky nose and crooked yellow teeth was manning the checkpoint. He held up his wand, and Hermione passed her forearm beneath it, as she'd seen the others in front of her do. The wand chirped softly and glowed green. The dark cowl of the guard's hood hid the upper half of his face, but the lips split in the unhygienic approximation of a smile.

"You may pass," he said gruffly, and she stepped forward, without looking back at the others. A moment later, she felt a presence close behind her, and a low voice said,

"We're right behind you. Go on." It was Fred. Hermione relaxed a little, and began to weave her way through the undulating mass of blackness. It was a little disorienting, and she was beginning to wonder how they'd find Tonks in this madness, but even as she did so, an arm reached out and grabbed Hermione's hand. The younger witch quickly stifled a shriek, as she recognized both the gait and the gray-streaked locks tumbling out of the hood of the Auror.

"It worked!" Hermione hissed to her, with a gleeful disbelief, and Tonks nodded.

"We should try to get as close to the front as we can," the Metamorphmagus whispered back, inclining her head toward the others, and motioning that they follow her. They threaded their way in the general direction of the ramshackle telephone booth, and Hermione was startled to see that people seemed to be just dropping through the pavement as they reached it. "I reckon they've enlarged the lobby," Tonks muttered, then rapped out a curse and a well-placed kick as someone nearly trod on her. At Hermione's rather amused look, she added defensively, "It's not like anyone here is going to be especially well-known for their manners."

Hermione cast what she hoped looked like a diffident glance over her shoulder, and was rewarded with the sight of the three Weasleys still following. Ron, in particular, seemed rather large and intimidating, due to the added weight, and he was having less trouble making his way through the crowd than his other family members.

The people directly in front of Hermione and Tonks vanished then, and Hermione braced herself, as she took her final step forward. The molecules of asphalt seemed to flow around her, and she felt as if she were falling quite slowly and gracefully for quite some time. Eventually she lightly landed, and they stepped through to the lobby. It had indeed been enlarged, but the layout looked much as Hermione remembered, though a fell air seemed to permeate the large chamber. The statue that Dumbledore had destroyed had been replaced again, by Voldemort, it seemed, this time. The witch was gazing beatifically up at the wizard, who was actually astride the Centaur, who was crushing – Hermione peered curiously at its hooves, thinking it was going to be crushing the goblin and the house-elf underneath. But the other two Magical Beings were completely absent from the new rendering. Instead what she saw was a human hand, extending from beneath the heavy hooves, and just beyond the hand, a twisted and broken pair of round spectacles. The pedestal of the statue had been artfully carved to give the barest suggestion of a crumpled human body flattened by the Centaur.

Hermione felt her gorge rise, and she fought for control, staring determinedly down at the rippling water, trying to compose herself. She noted absently that there was no coinage of any kind dispersed through the pool. She didn't suppose that Voldemort's regime was much disposed to charity. Another movement, and Ron was beside her. She felt, rather than saw, him recoil away from the statue, muttering foul words under his breath. When she chanced a glance at him, she saw that he was absolutely ashen, and looking at her, almost furtively.

"Bloody hell, Hermione, I – " he said in a low, trembling whisper that sounded like the embryonic form of an apology. She shook her head at him. Not right now, Ronald. Tonks was eying her watchfully, and she turned shakily to the Auror, with a nod that she was okay.

"Merlin save us!" rasped Mr. Weasley hoarsely, coming to stand beside them and taking in the grisly artwork.

"Let's go," Tonks muttered, and they resumed their course toward the dais. There seemed to be a VIP section, which contained chairs, and was obviously magically cordoned off, as people periodically

careened off of an unseen barrier nearby. They moved to the right of this area, where people seemed to be able to stand right at the very edge of the dais. Hermione figured there must be some kind of spell barricades up around the dais, Voldemort being as paranoid as he was. They were still a good 10 meters away from the front, but the crush of people simply too dense to move through. They were already drawing dirty looks from people that had been outmaneuvered, and Hermione did not relish being hexed in company like this.

As they finally stopped to take in the décor, Hermione was astounded. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting – Voldemort did not really seem to be the balloons-and-bunting type of wizard, but this.... The plush looking indigo and gold furnishings that she remembered were dimmed and distorted by lit sconces of pale green flame. It reminded her, hideously, of Harry's cell in the Riddle House. An imposing podium of sleek ebony wood, on which the Dark Mark was emblazoned in a poisonous shade of green, stood alone in the center of the dais. There was a line of polished black chairs across the rear of the dais, their backs carved in the manner of coiled snakes. And lined around the edges were gleaming rows of grinning white skulls. Hermione swallowed with difficulty and tried not to look at the horrible eyeless faces. There was a floating display of red numbers similar to Hermione's clock from the night before, counting down to zero. It currently read 2:24. Two minutes until the rally begins, she thought, looking down to her right at the Order, who ranged in a rather solemn, silent line. Ron was immediately next to her on her left. She nudged Tonks, pointing to the black podium, and tried to look animated and excited to be there. The Auror caught on quickly, as did Fred, and they both tried to put on more of a show to whomever might be watching.

A moment later, a patrician figure with his hair tied back in a neat white tail arrived at the podium to a thunderous roar of approval from the crowd. Other members of the Death Eater elite took seats in the chairs placed there for that purpose. Hermione cupped her hands to her mouth, managing to shroud all of her already hooded features, and whistled shrilly, while Ron looked at her in shock.

“We’re Death Eaters, Ron! Look thrilled to be here before someone notices that you don’t!” She hissed authoritatively at him. He looked nervously at her, then down the row to Fred and Tonks, who were pumping their fists exuberantly into the air, and joined somewhat half-heartedly in the chant that was pulsing through the crowd,

“Mal-foy! Mal-foy! Mal-foy!”

For it was Lucius Malfoy, one of Voldemort’s most trusted lieutenants since his escape from Azkaban – and more so since his successful conquest of Hogwarts – who graced the stage. His gaze raked the crowd in an oily, patronizing way, and Hermione instantly felt dirty, even in the anonymity of the masses.

“Good morning, fellow freedom fighters, followers of the Dark Lord, and bearers of the Mark!” He said, raising his voice on the word “Mark” in a way that was calculated to draw cheers. Freedom fighters! Hermione thought derisively, but cheered along with everyone else. I’m going to have to take a shower when I get home. She felt Ron shift uncomfortably from foot to foot beside her. “The Dark Lord himself will be speaking to you shortly. He wishes to thank you for your allegiance. With your assistance, his victories have been unprecedented and absolute! He does reward those who serve him loyally and well. Equally does he chasten those who betray him or fail in their appointed task.” The cheering died down to a more ominous rumble. “We will also be seeing some of those who have betrayed him – who have spit in his very face by their resistance of his ascension – get what they have come to so justly deserve!”

“A. K! A. K! A. K!” Chanted the crowd, seeming to have very quickly become both restless and thirsty for blood. Lucius smiled at them paternally.

“I’m certain you’d want rather more sport than that,” he said, sounding almost jovial, and the crowd went wild again. Mr. Weasley looked very pale, and Ron seemed just this side of throwing up. She threaded her hot and clammy fingers through Ron’s, and he looked at her with some measure of gratitude. There are times to maintain one’s righteous indignation, but this is not it, she could see him thinking.

“Now, while we await the arrival of the illustrious new Leader of the British Wizarding World, we have engaged some entertainment for your amusement.” Hermione felt Ron slowly tense up, and did so as well, clearly wondering what Voldemort and his minions would consider “entertainment”. Evidently there had been some kind of drawing held, for Lucius called out some numbers, and people began to pick their way through the throng from several different directions.

“I don’t like the look of this,” Tonks hissed in Hermione’s ear, as a ragtag band of extremely frightened Muggles was herded unceremoniously out on stage. There were a couple of teenaged girls clinging to each other, a matronly looking woman, a very handsome collegian, an elderly man using a walking stick, and a thin young man with multiple piercings who looked very pale and ill.

“Each one of our winners today,” Lucius continued cheerfully, although his disdain at playing emcee now seemed to be seeping through,” will receive a Muggle to dispose of – their choice – in front of us all. The Dark Lord is watching. Do him proud.”

Hermione looked wildly at Tonks, who shook her head, looking stricken. The pierced young man wobbled and threw up on the dais, which drew enormous jeers from the crowd. Someone conjured up a hail of rotting produce, which soared up to the dais, splattering the young man with seeds and overripe pulp.

“Now, now,” Lucius chastised. “You didn’t win the raffle, now did you?” He sounded like he was scolding a young child for throwing a ball in the house. He Scourgified the mess with a lazy flick of his wand.

A thin and inbred looking man with a particularly beaky nose stepped to the front of the cluster of winning wizards, smiling rather unpleasantly. The teenagers sobbed and clung to each other. He raised his wand.

“Tonks!” Hermione hissed, horror and panic in her voice.

“We do something, and we all die! And then they die anyway,” Tonks said sadly, wrapping her fingers tightly around her wand.

“I know,” Hermione admitted, her voice a barely audible whimper. The little old man with the walking stick shuffled forward, placing himself in front of the girls, and looked the beaky man in the eye without flinching, standing with a quiet dignity that disconcerted the crowd. It shuffled like a massive, but uneasy beast, and finally a cry rang out,

“Kill the Muggle!” The mass of people seemed to jostle back to the task at hand, taking up the chant, sending it thrumming through the room like the heartbeat of the aforementioned beast. Hermione shouted too, tears that she did not dare shed stinging her eyes.

There was a flash of green light, and the little old man dropped like a stone. The teenagers sobbed more loudly.

“That was the man screening everyone at the entrance,” Hermione whispered suddenly to Ron, pulling on his hand with hers to get his attention. “How’d he get down here ahead of us?”

“He’s a wizard employee, Hermione,” Ron said, in a voice that was a mere shadow of his usual withering tone. “There’s probably a back entrance.” There was a flash, and Hermione averted her eyes from the tableau of the middle-aged woman hanging upside down, shrieking hysterically, which was followed by a ghastly muffled crunching noise, and silence. The next Muggles were dispatched with alacritous Unforgivable curses. It seemed like everyone was eager to show off their Avada Kedavra skills to the Dark Lord. Hermione was pathetically grateful. At least it was quick.

Two leering wizards played with the teenage girls a bit together – spinning them around in the air and breaking a few of their bones – before killing them with a Diffindo much like the one Hermione witnessed at the Riddle House. Ron weaved visibly on his feet, and Hermione dug her fingers into his hands like talons. Watch yourself, Ron, she warned wordlessly.

When the last Muggle had been killed, and the bodies had been Banished, Lucius cleaned the stage again, and took a seat next to his

wife, after announcing that the Dark Lord's arrival was imminent. He seemed disgruntled, and Hermione wondered if he was disappointed that most of the enthralled winners had chosen to use an A.K. rather than something messier and more sensational.

Just then, there was a flurry of drumbeats, followed by a chorus of mournful sounding trumpets, as two very large Death Eaters brought several dirty and shackled prisoners out onto the dais. For the most part, they were emaciated and filthy, walking with the resigned slump that bespoke of their expectation of impending and painful death. She felt Ron go rigidly tense beside her, as they both caught side of a head of muted ginger hair, diffused by neglect. He was neither as dirty nor as thin as the others, but his face was a purplish, almost unrecognizable mass. Clearly, the Death Eaters in charge of him had not been as reticent to use other curses as the ones killing Muggles on stage earlier.

"Percy," Ron breathed through barely parted lips. Hermione squeezed his hand sympathetically, and darted her eyes in the other direction to look at Mr. Weasley and Fred. They were still as stones, eyes riveted against their will toward the macabre scene playing out on stage.

Behind Percy shuffled a young woman whose torn and grayed clothing did nothing to disguise her regal bearing and willowy form. Matted, lank hair that once looked to have been a shiny blond hung down her back.

"No," Ron said, very softly, chanting it over and over again like a mantra. "No, no, no, no, no...." he watched helplessly as the woman, unmistakably his sister-in-law, was marched across the dais to stand by Percy. She was limping, and Percy seemed to be surreptitiously helping her stand. Their shackles were magical in origin, and so did not clank or rattle. An ominous, expectant silence pressed down upon the entire assembly.

The drums broke out again, and Hermione jumped. There was a deafening clap of thunder and a pillar of fire shot down from the ceiling to the center of the dais. When the smoke cleared, there stood the flat-nosed, red-eyed spectacle of Lord Voldemort. He pointed his

fingers at the corners of the stage, and beams of fire spewed from the fingertips to form into two large Trolls, shackled but imposing, forming obvious barriers between the Dark Lord and his followers. The crowd erupted into a cacophony of cheers, and Hermione fought the urge to bury her head in Ron's shoulder. I want Harry, she thought mournfully.

"Greeting to all my loyal followers!" Voldemort said in the shrill voice that haunted Hermione's nightmares. "It is indeed a glorious new day!" He paused to savor the chorus of cheers that bounced off of the walls and ceiling. "We have utterly crushed the opposition, and with the death of Harry Potter, our victory will be total and complete." More cheers. Hermione felt a thin smile curl her lips, clutching fiercely to the glee that filled her to hear him admit that Harry still eluded him. "We have taken control of the Wizarding Government, and have initiated the Muggle Purge!" More huzzahs. "As I'm sure you are aware, the villages of Godric's Hollow and Ottery St. Catchpole were destroyed in their entirety two days ago. When Harry Potter's hometown was annihilated, he did nothing! His power is nothing compared with my own, and well he knows it. He will be brought under my dominion, to join those who have defied me before, to their peril." Here he gestured expansively at the rows of skulls lining the stage. "Here you see the fate of those who opposed me here, at Hogsmeade, and at Hogwarts. So will be the fate of all who oppose me in the end." Hermione felt Ron's hand clench convulsively around hers, and he shuffled, as he drew his hood more closely around his face. She looked at the skulls with a new kind of horror, knowing that they had once belonged to people she both knew and loved.

"Harry Potter!" Voldemort called out, as if searching for him, addressing him directly. "We brought you back a souvenir from your ancestral home, if you care to come and claim it." There was laughter from the crowd, and Voldemort stiffened suddenly, almost sniffing the air, as Tonks had in the alleyway, and his terrifying eyes briefly probed the crowd. Hermione shrank instinctively back into her cowl. The moment appeared to pass, and Voldemort raised both hands, bringing them together over his head with a loud clap.

Two marble-white tombstones appeared hovering in the air, moving in opposite directions, to meet just in front of the center of the dais. Clearly visible on the smooth faces were etched two names "Lily

Evans Potter” and “James Potter”. He clapped his hands together again, and the stones smashed against each other, shattering into dust and rubble with a deafening noise. Powder sifted down onto the heads of the crowd.

“Inferius,” the Dark Lord intoned, and the crowd sent up an uncomfortable murmur. Hermione felt all the blood drain from her face. Please, no...she thought desperately, as two ungainly figures moved from the shadows to the center of the stage. They were two mostly desiccated skeletons, with shreds of hair and scraps of clothing still clinging to the yellowed bones. Voldemort waved his wand like a baton, and made the skeletons do a jaunty little dance. “It’s a pity you aren’t here, Harry Potter, to once again meet your parents.” Another flick of his wand, and the skeletons bowed, kissing their hands to the crowd, who laughed and cheered at the grisly spectacle.

A low groan issued from Ron that was swallowed up in the jubilant crowd noise. Hermione could just barely hear Tonks cursing on her other side. Hermione felt herself trembling from head to foot. She withdrew her hand from Ron’s and made herself clap loudly, but she could not cheer – she could not. She could only hope that somehow Luna had turned off the Wireless before Harry heard any of this; her heart tightened painfully in her chest as she thought of Harry sitting powerlessly in the War Room, angry and mourning, listening impotently as his parents’ graves and very bodies were desecrated and mocked.

Thankfully, Voldemort seemed to soon tire of the game. As gratifying as dishonoring the bodies of those who had defied him so many times must have been to him, Hermione thought, it paled in comparison to actually being able to kill the upstart brat who had managed to battle him to a draw over and over again. He let the bodies of the Potters drop unceremoniously to the dais, where they flopped into a jumbled pile of bones, and turned to the dissidents, who had been watching the performance with ill-concealed horror.

“Bring the prisoners forward!” Voldemort shrieked, even though they were scarcely over 2 meters behind him. The large Death Eater guards prodded them with magical pikes, and they shuffled forward,

the manacles buzzing and glowing yellow as the prisoners moved painfully against them. He was obviously saving Percy and Fleur for the end, and dispatched several of the prisoners quickly, reading out their names and the charges against them, before hitting them with Avada Kedavra.

“You!” Voldemort said, making a stabbing motion at Fleur with his wand. “What is your name, girl?”

“My name is Fleur Delacour Weasley,” Fleur said, in a high clear voice, her fluid French accent as elegant as ever. She lifted her chin and looked toward the crowd defiantly.

“Ah, yes. A member of that traitorous clan... and not by blood, but by marriage, by choice,” Voldemort’s voice was astounded, as if he could not imagine willingly allying oneself with such a family. The audience rustled and booed, and a few more pieces of rotten fruit were lobbed half-heartedly onto the stage, as it appeared most were afraid of accidentally hitting the Dark Lord.

“I love my husband, and his family,” she said resolutely, resulting in more jeers. Her eyes grazed across the crowd contemptuously, and suddenly seemed to light on the row of Order members. She grew very still, for an infinitesimal moment, and moved her eyes elsewhere gradually, betraying nothing.

“Even though they maintain their alliance with Harry Potter?” Voldemort asked, practically spitting the name. He was very close to Fleur now, but she did not look at him, keeping her eyes straight ahead on the roiling crowd instead.

“Even so, yes,” she said. Hermione was filled with admiration for her. She and Ginny had both tended to dismiss her out of hand because of her Veela traits, but Hermione was suddenly and forcibly reminded that the Frenchwoman had been a Tri-Wizard champion, and her name certainly would not have been drawn from the Goblet, had she not been capable.

“Do you maintain your alliance with Harry Potter and his treasonous Order?” he hissed, playing his trump card. The crowd went absolutely

still, and Hermione felt her heart stop. Fleur looked at him then, with an abrupt swivel of her graceful neck, contempt clear on her beautiful face. Voldemort had never appeared so inhuman and lizard-like as he did then, in comparison with such – even dirty and wounded – loveliness.

“Until the day that I die,” she enunciated confidently. Voldemort backhanded her violently, and Fleur fell backwards, her body convulsing in pain, as the restraints punished her for the sudden movement. The crowd shrieked and gibbered in rage. Hermione could almost feel the fury bubbling from Voldemort – he had neglected one of the most important rules followed by solicitors the world over – Never ask a question to which you do not already know the answer. She yelled again with the crowd, not in anger, but in triumph, at Fleur’s effrontery and amazing courage.

“You do realize that today is that day?” Voldemort asked with casual malice, recovering his composure. “Your allegiance with Harry Potter is utterly and completely without worth.” Fleur had faced forward stoically, after staggering back to her feet with Percy’s help, which had earned him a none too gentle prod from one of the guards. But at Voldemort’s words, she turned toward him again, and smiled.

“Not if it pisses you off,” she said, even the slang sounding stately in her foreign accent. Hermione darted her eyes toward Mr. Weasley, and saw a proud smile playing across his lips, even as his eyes were suspiciously moist. Voldemort turned toward the cursing and angry crowd, with his arms wide, a deceptively pleasant smile on his face, like an indulgent parent. You see what I have to put up with, the outspread arms and smile said.

Then, moving as rapidly as a striking snake, he whirled back on Fleur, drawing his wand so quickly that it was a blur.

“Carioso!” he shouted, his voice blurring and overlapping Percy’s cry of,

“NO!” The guards scrambled after him, as he dove in front of Fleur, the yellow glow of his shackles hissing and sparking in protest.

Voldemort's curse hit him in the gut, and he fell into Fleur, knocking her down and landing half atop her.

The muted cry from Mr. Weasley was almost lost in the roar of the crowd. Hermione covertly peered down the line again to see Fred visibly holding him up. She reached over to link her arm through Ron's, as he wavered on his feet.

Voldemort raised his wand again, and Fleur lifted her chin to look him fearlessly in the face, holding Percy's slumped form on top of her knees.

But then he stopped, his spine going rigid, as if he'd heard something no one else did. Pivoting slowly, he turned on his heel to face the crowd, whose roaring bloodlust had downshifted into an uneasy ripple.

"You are here, aren't you?" His voice was low and oily, his red eyes roved the people before him. "Harry Potter, I know you're here! I can feel you! Give yourself up, and I may let this French blood traitor live!"

"What the hell?" Ron whispered in a befuddled voice. Hermione was shaking her head.

"He can't be here. There's no way." Mr. Weasley and Fred had moved into more of a knot with the rest of the Order, so they could hear what was going on. Hermione met Fleur's gaze briefly and nodded once, while Tonks looked questioningly at her. "Fleur knows we're here. She must have recognized me."

"So has the Dark Lord just lost his marbles then?" Fred said quietly, derision evident in his voice.

"I don't understand," Hermione hissed. "The only way he could be here is if someone from the house brought him. Nobody would do that." Even as she spoke the words, Neville flashed in her mind, but she shook off the thought. She had no proof of anything, only vague and nebulous suspicions. Tonks looked at her suddenly with a dawning awareness in her eyes.

"You've brought him here," the Auror said in a low whisper, while Hermione and Ron stared at her in utter bewilderment. Voldemort stepped down from the dais, and began to move slowly through the crowd, knocking people in the VIP section aside with powerful waves of wandless magic. Chairs flew into the air, clattering noisily to the ground, as people yelled and tried to dodge them. Hermione tracked him out of the corner of her eye, noting that, mercifully, he seemed to be moving in a wide arc away from them, walking slowly and carefully, patiently – trolling – to use Harry's word.

"What the hell are you talking about?" she asked fiercely, more fear than anger evident in her voice.

"Your magic," Fred muttered, having caught on as well. "You channeled your magic through Harry."

"And Voldemort can sense the traces of Harry in me?" Hermione finished questioningly, blushing a little as the phrasing unwittingly carried her mind to their night together. "Then we've got to go. Now!" The Dark Wizard continued to meander through the room, head held high, searching for whiffs of Harry's magical signature, occasionally blasting people out of his path. The crowd rumbled unsteadily, and people tried to move toward the exits, as the massive beast began to grow nervous and panicky.

Hermione's eyes shifted to the camel-colored strap of Fred's knapsack, just barely showing near the collar of his cloak.

"Fred, can you release the Trolls?" she asked, her gaze flicking toward the lumbering creatures shackled at the corners of the dais.

"Fanged Frisbees ought to do it," Fred said, his eyes narrowing, as he began to mentally calculate the logistics involved.

"Okay, that will be our diversion," Tonks said, taking over, a plan obviously forming in her head. "Ron, give Hermione your medallion." Ron carefully removed it and placed it in Hermione's cupped palm, an intent look coming onto his face. "Go with your father, back to the safehouse. Fred, you have your Portkey?" The other Weasley son also nodded. "Good – it'll pass through wards, but it'll probably set off

some alarms. We need all the distractions we can get. Loose those trolls and then get out of here. Don't go straight back, just in case they trace it. Hermione and I are going on a rescue mission." She nodded toward the dais.

"Like hell you are!" Ron burst out suddenly. Voldemort had reached the rear of the room and was making a wide circle; he would be heading in their direction soon. The crowd shifted and stumbled; there were cries of pain as people were trodden underfoot by the urgency of others to quit the rally.

Tonks leveled Ron with a glare, and shape-shifted suddenly. Hermione took an involuntary half-step backwards, as the leering features of Antonin Dolohov replaced the quirky ones of the Auror she knew. The prominent Death Eater had not been present on the dais, which had now emptied as Voldemort's most trusted spilled into the crowd to Avada the persons responsible for ruining their celebration. Tonks pulled the hood more closely around her face.

"Fred, you have any Nosebleed Nougats?" Fred dug in his pack quickly, and pulled out a foil-wrapped candy, handing it to Dolohov/Tonks. "Eat this, Hermione. That way, I don't have to hit you. Take your hair down – it needs to be hanging in your face." Hermione ate the nougat obediently, and Tonks twisted her arms around behind her back in one sudden motion. "You're going to be the prisoner. Keep your wand out of sight!" She nodded grimly to the Weasleys. "Now, Fred!"

Fred bent low, and released a pair of Fanged Frisbees in two different directions so quickly that Hermione never actually saw them in his hands. There was a distant clank and cries of outrage and alarm told Hermione that the twin had made his mark. The Frisbees must have nicked the ankles of the Trolls as well, for Hermione saw them snort and shake their heads in dumb pain, as they began to stumble clumsily around in the crowd, which jerked and shifted abruptly, growing more and more uneasy by the moment. Voldemort had begun to increase his pace, as if he realized that he was nearer, but the erratic movement of the crowd, hampered by the Trolls, impeded his progress. Tonks began propelling Hermione roughly through the

crowd toward the stage, as Voldemort completed his circuit of the back of the room, and started forward.

"Lucius," Dolohov's voice drawled, once Tonks and Hermione had reached the rear of the dais.

"Antonin!" Lucius responded, surprised. "I thought you were at Hogwarts! Don't tell me you finally let them make an Effingus?" Tonks tensed for a moment behind Hermione, but then said,

"I decided to take a chance," she hedged.

"Well, I won't do it," Lucius said stalwartly. "One Lucius Malfoy's more than enough anyway, right?" He nudged Tonks conspiratorily.

"To be sure!" Tonks replied.

"Who have you there?" Malfoy asked, nudging Hermione's leg with the tip of his cane, looking with some repugnance at Hermione's blood-smeared, bedraggled person.

"This one had a vial of Exploding Elixir," Tonks said, shoving Hermione roughly. "Says she didn't intend to use it on the Dark Lord. I guess I'll find out for sure after I ... interrogate her."

"Good hunting, Antonin," Lucius smirked, stepping aside so that they could make their way out the back entrance. Tonks had nearly reached the door, when she turned, as if she'd just remembered something.

"Do you think I should secure the other prisoners as well? If Potter is here, he might try to rescue them." Malfoy turned to look appraisingly at where Fleur knelt onstage with a crumpled Percy. There was a new uproar from the crowd as one of the Trolls finally went down, taking Merlin knew who with it.

"We could just A.K. them now," Lucius said doubtfully. At that moment, a lower-echelon Death Eater ran up to Malfoy, panting and cowering. "What?" Lucius snarled, his lip curling.

“There was – we just – up in the control room – we registered the activation of an Unauthorized Portkey,” said the lackey, sounding very young.

“Aren’t they all Unauthorized now?” Lucius chuckled, looking at Tonks as if to share the joke.

“This wasn’t by a Death Eater, Sir. No Mark showed up on the grid.” The smile fell off Malfoy’s face. Hermione relaxed ever so slightly in Tonks’ grip. The others had made it out.

“Was it in or out?” he asked intently, gripping the lackey’s arm tightly.

“We aren’t sure – we don’t – it’s never read one before. The system is – ” The lackey cringed, and Lucius hurled him to the ground, turning graciously back to Tonks.

“My apologies, Antonin. They say that Replication doesn’t make you stupider, but sometimes I’m inclined to wonder. Damned Anti-Apparation wards. Take the prisoner down. And – let me have a taste when you’re done, will you?”

“If there’s anything left of her!” Tonks managed to chortle, while Hermione’s stomach churned. As Lucius melted into the hysterical crowd, Tonks strode toward the edge of the dais, half-dragging Hermione.

“You, there!” Tonks hollered to one of the oversized guards. “Why are you still standing here, filthy son of a Mudblood bastard? Get down there, and contain those Trolls, or do you want the Dark Lord crushed?”

“But, Lord Dolohov, the criminals – ?” The guard protested, gesturing toward Fleur and Percy. Tonks’ wand flicked back and forth subtly, and the guards’ eyes glazed over. Confundus! Hermione thought gleefully.

“I’m to take them back to their cells and secure them. If Potter’s here, we don’t want him to free them. The Dark Lord will finish them off later.”

“Yes, sir,” the guard said, nudged his partner, and together, they wandered off the dais.

“Let’s go,” Tonks ordered tersely, keeping up the charade by flicking her wand threateningly at Fleur. “Get him up! Now! Or he dies here!” Fleur’s jaw trembled, and mutiny flashed briefly in her eyes, but she struggled to lift Percy under her slight weight. There was another thunderous roar, as the second Troll fell. Voldemort was so close – closing in like a bloodhound on the scent.

“There’s no time,” Hermione said levelly. “He’s almost here.” She looked back at Fleur, and dismantled the ward around the stage with a deft twist of her wand. “Here,” she said, removing her watch and setting it with a quick Portus. She tossed it to Fleur by one strap, and said, “Sing ‘Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star’. Wait until a Weasley gets there.”

Fleur nodded and sank back down onto the dais, cradling an unconscious Percy in her arms. As her lips began to move, an inarticulate cry of rage met her ears. Voldemort had seen her – and where she was, she figured he assumed Harry was also. He was livid.

Harry... she thought desperately of him, squeezing her eyes shut, and vanished, even as a beam of green light passed through the place where she had once been.

TBC

Well, I had much more fun writing this chapter. I hope you liked it as well. Long again, but I wanted to get the entire rally in here. You may leave a review on your way out if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Twelve: Aftershock

Hermione felt her body instinctively tense as Voldemort raised his wand, but with no more sound than a rush of air, she was gone. One heartbeat later, she was in the War Room next to a nearly panicked Harry, having Apparated to the signature of his medallion.

“Hermione!” Harry exhaled, as if all the breath had left his lungs with the word. Heedless of the eyes of the other Order members, he crushed her into his arms, evidently deciding that since he could not breathe, then she should not either.

“Har-ry,” she croaked in response, feeling her eyes slide shut in gratitude, but pushing against him until he reluctantly let her go. Her eyes floated anxiously over to the Weasleys, darted back to Harry, and then over to the Wireless set up in the corner. Fred seemed to catch on to what she was trying to wordlessly convey, and shook his head in the negative, very subtly. Another weight lifted from her shoulders. Thank Merlin. For whatever reason, Harry had not listened to the broadcast of the rally. Remus, on the other hand, wore a pale, drawn look of horror and vaguely nauseated disbelief, as if – all evidence to the contrary – he could not believe that anyone claiming the chromosomes of humanity could have committed such acts. Hermione surmised that he must have heard what went on. Her eyes flicked to the Wireless again; she wondered at which point it had been deemed too much to handle and had been shut off. She tried to remove her mind from the endless pictures of the Muggles dying one by one, without even understanding why these people hated them, and the corpses of Harry’s parents... dancing...

“Hermione, are you all right?” Harry asked, cautiously and somewhat fearfully. She jumped and smiled half-heartedly at him, not even having realized until he spoke that she had closed her eyes again. She lowered her hands carefully to her sides, palms parallel to the floor, taking a deep breath and appearing to visibly calm herself. “Fred,” she turned to him and Ron, with her most matter of fact voice. “I gave Fleur my Portkey. She was using it when I left, so I’m hoping she got away. I sent them to the Quidditch pitch behind the Burrow again – hopefully, it’s still fairly isolated, especially after – ” she shook her head abruptly, and did not complete the thought. “You need to

bring them back here, quickly. I'm sure both of them need medical attention." Fred nodded solemnly and set his Portkey, while Ron said quickly,

"You might need help. I'll go with you." Fred sang his song of choice, while Ron grabbed the sleeve of his black cloak. They both vanished. Mr. Weasley drifted upstairs, mumbling something vaguely about the intention to help Penelope and McGonagall prepare for new arrivals in the infirmary. Hermione watched him go with sympathy and compassion reflecting luminously from her dark eyes.

When she turned back to Harry, he was staring at her, flabbergasted.

"You got them out?" Hermione regarded him quietly for a moment, and her eyes pooled with shimmery tears.

"I got you out, didn't I?" She said, her teasing falling flat as the emotion quivered in her voice. "Besides, it was mostly Tonks' doing anyway, and – " She looked up at Remus, who was still standing, leaning on the cane he'd been using, every muscle and line of his body completely tense.

"Where is she?" he asked hoarsely, his eyes boring into Hermione's. She looked down at her empty wrist, out of immortal habit, before remembering that her watch didn't work and Fleur had it anyway.

"Professor Lupin, she was right behind me, I swear. She had her medallion. I can't think what happened that – " She stopped abruptly. There were very few reasons why Tonks would not have arrived yet, and fewer still were good. The werewolf exhaled a shuddering breath and turned his back on them, limping across the War Room to the window. Harry and Hermione exchanged agonized glances with Luna and Neville, who were seated on the very edge of their chairs, as though they might need to leap up at any moment.

There was a small sound, barely a click, like the snap of fingers, and Tonks, looking decidedly disheveled and worse for the wear, the hem hanging raggedly from her robes and dragging the ground, appeared by Remus' side. In one glance, she took in everyone's tense faces and misinterpreted the reason for them.

"Percy and Fleur aren't here?" she asked, her eyes huge and sorrowful.

"Fred and Ron went to get them," Hermione told her quickly. "We think everyone made it."

"Merlin's Beard, Nymphadora!" Remus burst out angrily, though the relief in his eyes gave him away. "What were you doing? Picking flowers?" Tonks seemed to realize the true origin of his emotion; she spoke in an astringent tone, but gazed at him with limpid eyes.

"Remus Lupin! Don't tell me that you would rather I'd left them there! They were your friends!" Hermione's eyes widened in alarm, and Harry hurled a confused look at her. "I just – Summoned them, and then put them in my pack. I had to shrink them. It's terribly undignified, but – but – " she looked up into the eyes of the man she loved, and her voice failed her. "They deserved better than what happened to them."

Remus' face convulsed a little, and he shook his head slightly, trying to tamp down his emotion enough to speak. Hermione had clapped one hand over her mouth, in an effort to quell the sobs that threatened to burst from her.

"It was a foolish risk, Nymphadora," he finally said. "You could have been killed, and Voldemort ... can't hurt them anymore."

"I said they deserved better, and I meant it, but I didn't do it for them," Tonks choked, looking up at him, then darted her eyes over to Harry.

"I know, and I love you all the more for it," Remus whispered, gathering her into his arms, in the same sort of bone-crushing hug that Harry had visited upon Hermione.

"Hermione," Harry said, in a carefully controlled near-whisper, "who the hell are they talking about?" She looked hopefully at Luna and Neville, who looked as bewildered as Harry did. He followed her glance.

"The three of us were out back... just talking." Harry informed her. "We didn't – I didn't want to hear – hear that you had been – hear what might happen over a wireless. Especially when – when I can't even – " he stopped and shook his head in agonized frustration. "So tell me now." His green gaze bored into her, daring her to speak anything other than the truth. "What happened at that rally that you don't want me to know about?" His eyes were angry-scared, and darted quickly from her to Remus and Tonks.

"Harry – " Hermione started, but stopped quickly when her voice cracked and wobbled, refusing to cooperate. She jerked her chin away from him and down, closing her eyes in complete frustration. He needs you. You have to pull yourself together, she berated herself.

"Hermione, I've lost my magic," he said evenly, his voice barely vibrating with just contained emotion. "That makes me – handicapped, I guess... but it doesn't make me a child. Tell me what the hell happened – who does Tonks have?"

Hermione linked her arm through his, and looked at him in much the same way that she had watched Mr. Weasley leave.

"Let's go outside," she said softly.

They went out the back door to sit on the patio. The sky was still threatening rain, though it had not actually made good on its promise yet. The wind was whipping at them vigorously, and Hermione could make out feathery tops on many of the waves. She cast a quick spell over her shoulder to bind her hair out of her eyes.

He turned to her abruptly, shoving his hands deep into his pockets, as the wind tossed his unruly hair into an ebony morass.

"Who did he kill?" He said this without a questioning tone, but one of resigned command, knowing that it was true before she even opened her mouth.

"Some Muggles," Hermione said, a little reluctantly. "They – they had – " she swallowed with difficulty. "They had a... contest." She choked on the last word. Harry paled, and looked like he was restraining

himself from either swearing violently or from vomiting. A spasm seemed to run its course over his frame, and then he raised his eyes to hers again, obviously indicating for her to continue. "He killed some – some wizards that he'd labeled as criminals. Percy and Fleur were with that lot. And – " she faltered again.

"Who does Tonks have? She brought them here for burial, didn't she? Who are they?"

"They – they were already dead, Harry. After he destroyed Godric's Hollow, he – " She stopped speaking when she saw his Adam's apple bob convulsively in his throat. He knows. In fact, Hermione wondered if he hadn't had an inkling from the moment Tonks opened her mouth. His face suddenly looked so drawn and white and old that Hermione stepped to his side instinctively, afraid that he was going to collapse.

"What did he do to my parents?" he asked in a dead and leaden voice. Hermione shook her head at him, unable to speak as the tears that had been threatening finally overspilled their boundaries.

"You don't need to know, Harry," she finally choked out. His eyes blazed then, with the same heartrending combination of smoldering anger, uselessness, and fear, and he grabbed her upper arms with both hands.

"Tell me what he did to them!" He bit off every syllable, speaking with an understated ferocity that nearly made Hermione tremble, not in fear of Harry, but in mute agony over what he continued to go through.

"No," she spoke the short word clearly and firmly, surprising both of them. He continued to stare at her, holding her arms, evidently trying to intimidate her into telling him. She met his gaze unflinchingly. "Is it going to change how you feel about him? Is it going to make you hate him less – more? – than you already do? He's a monster, Harry. We already knew that – even before today. He's performed so many atrocities and killed so many people that he doesn't even qualify as human anymore; he shredded his own soul for the sake of eternal life. And all those people following him are just dancing along behind the piper blithely to their deaths – either they know what he is and don't care, or they really are ignorant, or they're cowardly and weak. They

deserve our contempt and our desire for justice. But telling you what happened only hurts you – you. Not him, not the Death Eaters, and not your parents. Just you. And I won't do it, Harry. I won't."

He released his grip on her then, and turned away from her, facing the sea, the wind snapping his hair like a dark banner. His hands returned to the depths of his pockets, and his spine and shoulders were rigid. It wasn't until they vibrated ever so slightly that Hermione realized that he was crying. Any noise he was making was swallowed by the rush of waves and wind.

She hesitated at first, not wanting to intrude on what could be a private moment of pain, but then she stepped to his side and leaned against him, wrapping one arm around his waist.

"I saw so many things today," she said, almost whispering, as if she were speaking only to herself. "So many things that – that nearly made me sick, made me feel angry and terrified and disgusted, made me wonder how people – humans – could do that to other humans. And I had to stand there in the crowd, bloody well surrounded by people who would have cheerfully ripped us limb from limb if they'd known who we were. We had to just – watch, and do nothing. Harry, it was awful – beyond awful, and I can't ever unsee that. But then, I don't really want to...because we shouldn't ever forget what he's done. If we forget, then he only grows more powerful and more deadly. If we forget, then everyone he's killed so far has died in vain, for nothing. So I'll live with those memories if I have to, but you've got enough nightmares of your own already. Am I wrong for wanting to spare you some of that?" She'd meant her last question to be rhetorical, but Harry uttered a breathless, shaky,

"No." His arms had been hanging limply at his sides, but after he spoke, they moved to encircle her waist. She relaxed a little.

"Tonks risked her life to bring them back. We can bury them here, Harry. No one will ever bother their rest again." Harry's chest heaved outward spasmodically, and he moved away from her, out of the embrace. "He couldn't hurt them, Harry. Not really. Not anymore." He stood so still, looked so fragile, as if one cross word would shatter him into a million tiny shards.

“No,” he agreed. “Not them. Just me. You. All of us. That’s who they want now. I should...go thank her – Tonks. I didn’t understand...before,” he said vaguely, as if his lips were moving without his brain’s knowledge or consent. Without further acknowledgment or invitation to join him, he strode back to the house, hands back in pockets, head and shoulders bent in a posture of defeat.

Hermione stood on the patio, the wind teasing at a few tendrils of her hair that had escaped the binding charm. Her face was stamped with an expression of muted sorrow, her hands clasped before her so tightly that the knuckles were white. How much more of this can he take? What will be the one thing that finally breaks Harry?

And on the heels of those thoughts came, Are we both completely crazy for thinking we can find even a particle of joy in this madness?

She wandered back into the house, feeling disquieted and ill-at-ease. Harry was nowhere to be seen, and Remus and Tonks were huddled close together in the windowsill of the War Room. So much for thanking her, Hermione thought sadly. She closed her eyes, pressed her fingers to her temples, and tried desperately to blot out the image of the little old man with the walking stick, placing himself between death and the teenaged girls. Tears pricked the backs of her eyelids. Death had come for them anyway.

She sighed tremulously and squeezed her eyes more tightly, in a vain effort to force back the tears. She didn’t even have time to mourn those they’d loved and lost, much less for some Muggles with whom she wasn’t even remotely acquainted. She shook her head in a series of repeated quick, short gestures, as if trying to shake off the pall of gloom that hung over her almost tangibly.

There was a loud crack, and Hermione jumped, stumbled over a small mat in the doorway leading to the kitchen, and swore under her breath.

“What took you so long?” Hermione said sharply, to cover up her fright. Ron was carrying Fleur, but almost immediately let his wand

take over, as soon as they'd materialized. Fred had Percy in a sort of fireman's carry, and the left shoulder of the younger Weasley's shirt was covered in blood.

"Fleur had dragged ... Percy away from the house... into the trees. Then she... passed out. We had a time... just finding them," Fred supplied, obviously out of breath, as he levitated his brother up the stairs behind Ron. "Plus, we Bounced once, just in case they tried to trace the portkey again." He added, referring to the technique where one makes a quick interim stop elsewhere while Apparating.

Percy was dying. Though Hermione couldn't profess to have overmuch experience with death, most of it having been acquired recently, and generally at a distance – the Order members and Aurors dropping on the battleground stole into her memory – one look at Percy told her the undeniable truth. His face was paper white and clammy, his eyes seemed to be sunken into his head, and his breathing was uneven and noisy, as if it were requiring all of his effort just to pump air in and out of his lungs. She followed the boys up the stairs to the infirmary, thinking sadly of the thinning, faded red hair of Mr. Weasley, lines of worry and loss seemingly permanently etched into his rapidly aging face. Her thoughts echoed those she'd had regarding Harry just moments before. How much? How much more?

When Penelope saw Percy, she sucked in an audible breath, watching him avidly with wide, concerned eyes. Whatever their relationship status had been as of late, it was obvious that Penelope still cared a great deal for him, Hermione thought.

"What happened?" Penelope said, with an attempt at a professional tone that she nearly pulled off.

"Got hit with a curse," Fred said. "Dove for it, to cover Fleur. Carioso." He looked grim, and Penelope paled. Hermione wondered what the extent of the curse was. She knew her Latin as well as anybody, and the incantation was a derivation of the Latin word for "decay".

"And – and Fleur?" the young mediwitch stammered, her eyes pulling unwillingly away from Percy and going to the pale Frenchwoman.

“Her leg’s broken,” Ron supplied, surprising Hermione, even though she’d been sitting next to him during their courses on field medicine and first-aid spells. “We would have tried to heal it, but it looks as if it’s been broken for awhile. Wanted you to have a look at it. I don’t know how she was even able to stand.” He paused, and his eyes dropped to the tops of his battered trainers. “They’ve both been tortured,” he mumbled, almost as an afterthought.

Penelope’s lovely eyes went to McGonagall, who’d been rearranging something in the Potions cupboard, and they exchanged a knowing glance.

“Professor, could you –?” she asked, gesturing toward Fleur, whose injuries were definitely less severe than Percy’s.

“Certainly, Miss Clearwater.” McGonagall’s tone was even more subdued than was usual as of late.

Penelope lifted her chin, and appeared to be steeling herself for what was to come. She stepped over to Percy’s bedside, and unfastened the ragged remains of his shirt. Mr. Weasley, hovering anxiously near the foot of the bed, trying to stay out of the way, turned so white that Hermione thought he was going to pass out, and she desperately tried to keep her stomach calm.

Percy’s abdomen was varying shades of purple, gray, and black, and was beginning to distend. Pus oozed from a couple of places where the skin had split open. The smell was not pleasant. Carioso, Hermione thought in horror. She began to understand, and threw a helpless glance at Tonks, who was standing nearest, hovering as uncomfortably in the doorway as Hermione herself. Why didn’t we hear about this one with Moody?

“It’s not an Unforgivable because it has other practical – even beneficial – uses,” Tonks whispered to her, apparently reading Hermione’s mind.

“Is – is he – is it – ?” Hermione couldn’t finish her question, even as certain as she was of the answer, but Tonks nodded.

“His flesh is rotting – while he’s still alive. There’s nothing Penelope can do but ease his pain.” Penelope was still working, swabbing the putrid skin, and pouring some kind of liquid over it that caused Percy to twitch and mutter deliriously under his breath. Silent tears were pouring down her face. Hermione watched, transfixed, helpless, stricken, as Ron – in a strikingly beautiful gesture of emotional selflessness and maturity – was the one to first approach Penelope, and ask her in a gentle voice if he could help her. She directed him to the supply cabinet, and he moved across the room, and began efficiently withdrawing materials.

She felt eyes on her then, as surely as if someone had called her name, and her head pivoted back toward the infirmary door, as if compelled. Harry was standing there, just behind Tonks, looking somehow even more lost and forlorn in the relative dimness of the corridor. He was watching her, not the grim tableau beyond, naked pain on his face. Is this what you want? Knowing that someday he could be me, and she could be you? She merely looked back at Penelope, watching her with a combination of sympathy and admiration, as the young mediwitch continued about her task, with face wet and eyes red, but her spine was straight and her shoulders square. Looking at her in that moment, Hermione knew – knew as if she felt it herself – that Penelope had no regrets in loving and having loved Percy. She inclined her head back toward Harry, looking almost regal, her glance clear and communicative. She hoped that she’d answered his unasked question.

“Miss Granger!” Professor McGonagall called from beside Fleur’s bed. “I need you to cast a Repelling charm on the bone, while I hold it in place. That will probably be the most efficient way to do it, while causing the least pain. Nice and easy, now.” She gently levitated Fleur’s leg, and Hermione nearly recoiled at the horrible bulge, where the bone had nearly broken the skin. She took a deep breath, and cast the spell, a faint hum and the movement of the bone the only indication that it was working. When the distortion had been reduced, McGonagall set it in place with an audible snap, fusing it with a wave of her wand and a trickle of bone-setting serum across the patient’s lips. Fleur let out a muffled cry, and her eyelids fluttered, but did not open. “Now, Miss Granger, if you’d be so kind as to fetch me some of

the Pain Relieving potion.” Hermione followed the professor’s instructions, quickly locating and handing off the required bottle.

Over at Percy’s bed, Penelope was affixing a large sterile square of bandage over Percy’s wounds, more from a desire to be doing something, or to cover up the ghastly rotting flesh, than for any medical good it could do, Hermione thought. Ron was still retrieving things as quickly as Penelope could request them, and Hermione suddenly felt very proud of him. Her eyes drifted over to Harry, and he seemed to be reading her mind, for he flicked his gaze over toward Ron, and then back to her, with a small upturn of his lips, not even enough to be called a smile.

Fleur stirred on her bed, and then moaned again, as McGonagall spooned some of the pain reliever into her mouth. Her eyes flew open in a panic, and she looked wildly around the room, finally resting on Mr. Weasley. She smiled, with her eyes closed, in unadulterated relief.

“Papa Weasley!” she exclaimed. “Oh, thank Merlin. Is Percy all right?”

“Penelope’s working on him,” Mr. Weasley hedged, mustering a smile for his daughter-in-law.

“He saved my life,” Fleur said vaguely. “Where is my husband?” She couldn’t miss the sudden tension in Mr. Weasley’s shoulders, and her eyes began to fill before he’d even said a word.

“We lost Bill in – in the battle for Hogwarts,” Mr. Weasley said softly. The room suddenly seemed too quiet. Professor McGonagall stopped fussing over Fleur’s other injuries, and grew very still.

Fleur’s face crumpled, and tears began to drip from the corners of her eyes, running down into her dirty, tangled hair. She shook her head silently, denying that what her father-in-law said could be true. Hermione’s heart broke for her, trying to imagine what she’d feel like if Harry – but the wound was too sensitive, too close to being real, and she couldn’t finish the thought, lest she break down before all of them. Instead she watched Mr. Weasley clamp his lips together, and reach for Fleur’s hand, caressing the lacerated, too-thin fingers, with

all the gentleness that he would demonstrate for his own flesh and blood. Fleur looked up at him helplessly, and tried to form words.

“I – ” was all she could manage. She had been so strong, so defiant and brave in front of Voldemort. Hermione wondered if it was because death had seemed a certainty. It had been expected, inevitable, and so did not invite fear. But now... to live knowing that her husband did not? Hermione’s eyes flickered over to Harry again. There are some things harder than dying, she thought.

“I know, I know,” Mr. Weasley nearly crooned, even as his own tears welled up at the thought of the eldest son he’d lost.

“You’re going to be fine, Mrs. Weasley,” Professor McGonagall said softly. “And so is your child.” Fleur froze suddenly, her eyes the only parts of her moving, alternating between Mr. Weasley and the Hogwarts teacher.

“You’re mistaken,” Fleur said coolly, a brittle note to her voice. “I miscarried two days ago.” The pain in her voice was reined in tightly, as if it would tear her apart if loosed. “The Death Eaters were – doing what they always do. That was when my leg was broken and when I started bleeding.” She struggled to maintain her tenuous grasp on her composure. “And – and I knew. I did not mind dying so much then.” Her jaw trembled, and her eyes lowered to her hands twisted in her lap, as if they were inherently fascinating.

Professor McGonagall flicked her wand lightly, and a small stream of paper began spewing from the side of it. She consulted it briefly, and showed it to Fleur.

“No more than about seven or eight weeks, I’d imagine,” McGonagall said. “Miss Clearwater should give you a more thorough examination to make sure the baby has sustained no trauma, but my wand is clearly reading an existing pregnancy, not a recent miscarriage.” Fleur looked at the paper again, and then back at McGonagall with a kind of rapt, fearful expression, as if she were afraid to believe that it was true. Her eyes were shiny with tears, and her hand trailed down to her abdomen.

"I was so – so afraid when I realized I was pregnant." Fleur said, seeing something with her mind's eyes that no one else could see. "I was locked in a cell, I didn't know what they were going to do with me, I didn't know where Bill –" she hiccupped, and stopped abruptly. "I didn't want it. I did not see how the timing could be any worse. And then when – when – all the blood – and I was – I realized how much I had wanted it." Hermione wondered if she was seeing her and Bill's last night together...wondered if it had been that night that this miracle baby had been conceived. Her eyes drifted toward Harry, and the longing pouring from his gaze startled her. She wondered if he was thinking the same thing she was. But her idle introspection was interrupted by an incoherent cry from Percy.

His back was arched off of the bed, and frantic hands scrabbled at the bandages that Penelope had only just finished applying. Veins bulged in his neck, and his limbs were trembling. Penelope's face was white and strained, as she whispered something soothing in his ear. She tried to intercept his flailing hands with her own, obviously trying to keep him from further injuring himself.

"Professor McGonagall!" Penelope exclaimed. "He's going to have to be sedated. He's going to cause himself further injury, if he isn't kept still. With the amount of pain he's – he's going to be in, it's probably better that he be unconscious...anyway." McGonagall moved to the potions cupboard to retrieve the necessary mixtures.

"N – no," Percy rasped out suddenly, surprising everyone in the room. His voice seemed to groan up from the very depths of his soul, and he was trying to talk with as minimal movement as possible. "Penelope..."

"Hello, Percy," she said, in as even a voice as she could muster. Her eyes were wide and shiny. Mr. Weasley squeezed and released Fleur's hand, and stood, moving carefully around McGonagall to where he was in Percy's line of sight.

"Son," Mr. Weasley managed, his voice nearly disappearing as his throat closed up. Percy's eyes rolled up in his head, as he strove to look up at his father.

“D – dad,” he grunted. “I should have told y’ – was alive...”

“Don’t worry about that now, Percy. We’re just glad you’re here. We all love you. We always have.” Another wave of pain racked Percy, and he trembled beneath Penelope’s light touch.

“Not – like you...” he managed to say. “Not... Gryffin’or...enough.”

“Yes, you are, Percy,” Mr. Weasley said gently. “You’ve saved Fleur, you know. Saved her baby – hers and Bill’s.” Fleur nodded emotionally, even though it would have been difficult for Percy to have seen the movement.

“Did I?” A rictus of a smile fluttered on Percy’s face briefly. Hermione noticed blood seeping through his shirt again, this time above the area where Penelope had placed the bandages. The curse’s effect was worsening. “I’m glad,” he breathed. “Where’s Mum?”

“You’ll see her soon,” Mr. Weasley said hoarsely. Hermione suddenly felt hot wetness sear her cheeks, although she could not recall when she’d begun crying. She stared down at her shoes, and the dirty trainers blurred and wavered in her gaze. She became aware of a firm grip above her elbow, and looked to see an indistinct rendition of Harry’s green eyes before her.

“Come on...” Harry said in a low, grim voice. “They need to be alone.” There were a few muttered words to the other Order members who were not technically family, and as quickly as that, he emptied out the infirmary, leaving the Weasleys alone to reconcile with their prodigal son.

Hermione moved to follow the other Order members down to the War Room, but Harry pulled her up the far stairs to the garret. Once they’d closed the door behind them, Harry turned to her, and suddenly enfolded her into his arms, muttering something under his breath that she could not quite catch.

“Harry, what’s wrong?” she asked, patting him on the back softly, as his frame trembled against hers.

"I'm just – it – Percy..." he shook his head, looking pained, and swore quietly. "The Weasleys – they – it was because of their support of me that Percy was estranged from them. And now, because of me, that he – he's – " He trailed off and slumped, while Hermione regarded him with wide, teary eyes. My Atlas, she thought, carrying the burden of everyone else's survival on those thin shoulders.

"The Weasleys made their choice, Harry," she told him softly. "And I think – even now – Mr. Weasley has no regrets about the choice to join the Order and fight. Percy made his choice too...but I think he's realized what he did. They'll be able to say ... good-bye."

"They shouldn't have to!" he burst out suddenly, his voice ringing loudly and discordantly in the small attic. "It's not fair – it – " he foundered again, and in his silence, Hermione heard echoes of her mute cry...How much more? He ran trembling hands through his disheveled dark hair. "And if it had been you, Hermione – Sweet Merlin, if it had been you..." She linked the fingers of one hand with his, and ran the fingers of the other through his hair.

"It wasn't me, Harry," she murmured. He was kissing her then, light feathery kisses, along her hairline and down the side of her jaw. She felt the supplication in his touch, his utter gratitude that she was alive, his fear that he would not be so lucky next time – and the guilt ... above and behind all of it was always the guilt.

"Stay with me again tonight," he said, as if she had not spent the last several nights in his bed, and the previous night doing something other than sleeping in it. There was a self-conscious look on his face, as if he feared rejection, and a glimmer of a smile skimmed over her features.

"As if you had to ask," she said lightly, and was rewarded with a faint smile herself. She tried to imagine from whence came his worry, but knew that he remembered no familial love and hadn't even experienced affection of any sort until he came to Hogwarts. And then people who loved him, people who chose to fight with him kept dying. Her eyes grew somber, and she met his gaze head on, looking into his eyes, willing him to read all the depth of emotion for him that resided there. "I'm not going anywhere, Harry," she intoned, as

seriously as she knew how. He kissed her again, one that lingered enticingly on her lips this time, and she felt some of the tension leave him. They sat in silence beneath the window for a long moment.

“Shouldn’t we go down there with them?” she asked presently. “What about Neville?” She asked, as they threaded their way through the stacks of crates, to sit beneath the lone window.

“Why?” Harry shrugged. His eyes flitted uncomfortably back to the door they’d just come through. “I put that detector in his drink like you asked. Nothing happened. What was supposed to happen?” Hermione had a mix of disappointment and confusion on her face.

“Nothing – if he wasn’t under polyjuice. I don’t understand...” Her brow furrowed, as she lowered her head and appeared deep in thought. Memories flashed through her mind. The odd smile that played across Neville’s face when he caught them nearly kissing, the comical way he’d splayed out over the window when she came in unexpectedly. The window had been open...what had he been doing? And Ron’s voice – suddenly loud in the room...Neville had said a downstairs window must have been open, but they were all closed... all closed. The plastic bottle of water, its contents sparkling in the afternoon sun, hit the ground with an audible thump and rolled. No water spilled out...but Neville had brushed her off, said he’d clean it. Clean what? Why had he wanted her to think something had spilled? Because what was in the bottle was not actually water, and he hadn’t wanted her to know what it was. “But it wasn’t polyjuice,” she said, almost to herself. She had been so sure...

Another flash of memory suddenly assailed her, this time from the more recent rally.

Tonks was talking to Lucius. He had made a comment about making an Effingus... assuming that’s why Dolohov was here, rather than Hogwarts.

“Effingus means ‘copy’,” Hermione said slowly.

“They say Replication doesn’t make you stupider, but sometimes I’m inclined to wonder.”

Hermione felt her eyes grow huge with realization. It fits, she thought. It fits everything...why there are so damn many of them now, how they were able to fight in so many places at once, hitting the Ministry and the wizarding world with all the subtle force of a bomb blast. She reached out blindly, and clutched at Harry's sleeve, her mouth moving soundlessly.

"Hermione?" Harry said, sounding a little worried now. "What's wrong?"

"They're clones," she said in a dazed voice of shock. "He's made up a Death Eater army of Replicants. That's why there are so many." Harry's eyes now were nearly as wide as hers, and his mouth pinched up in furious helplessness.

"How are we supposed to stop an army when he can just make new people any time he wants?" he exclaimed, prompting a hasty hushing from Hermione, who took a moment to be grateful that he was accepting all this from her merely on her own recognizance.

"There's got to be a way to stop them," Hermione said in her best determined voice. "I'll need to do – "

"Some research," Harry chimed in on her last two words, and she gave him a mock glare. He shrugged in an if the shoe fits manner.

"Let's try and talk to Tonks," Hermione said, winding her hand through his, as they exited the garret, and finally started down the stairs.

People were screaming...whether in rapture or terror, Hermione could not discern. The forever undulating roar whistled and shrilled in her ears. She wanted to cover her ears, but her hands provided feeble shielding against the omnipresence of the noise.

She was being knocked around, washed back and forth without control in a sea of humanity. The flailing, the screaming, it went on as if the people involved never tired, never ran out of breath.

She was at the rally.

Voldemort was on the stage, killing the Muggles. She saw the little old man block the teenagers again, but even in his death, he was unable to prevent the inevitability of theirs. One by one they all fell...all... while the people in the crowd screamed their approval, lusting and thirsty for Muggle blood.

Screaming. Hermione found herself joining them, screaming for a world that slowly spiraled into the vortex of destruction. Screaming against those who really believed that blood determined ability, talent, beauty, worth...

Her throat felt dry and raw, but she continued to scream, her own noise lost in the eternal wails of those around her. And then her parents were led onto the stage, shackled, beaten, their eyes tripping across the maddened faces, as if looking for someone...looking for her.

Further noise died in her throat.

"Mama..." she managed weakly, and such a feeble sound could not hope to make itself known in the maelstrom. Voldemort jerked his head in her direction as if he'd heard, and he smiled. He killed her parents without even looking at them. The roar of his faithful drowned out the hollow noise of their bodies hitting the platform.

Hermione felt her knees buckle, but knew that if she fell now, she'd be trampled beneath the feet of these people – these people who supped with Evil and welcomed Death as an honored guest.

Another prisoner was brought out. Clearly, he was meant to be the pièce de résistance for the event, for the white noise swelled to an unbelievable crescendo, as Voldemort raised both arms into the air, in a gesture of triumph.

Hermione's throat closed so quickly that her breath caught in a squeaky gasp. It was Harry.

"This is your fault, girl!" Voldemort said, looking straight at her, alone, lost, adrift in that ever-churning sea. "This is your fault." Hermione

looked at him mutely, knowing he was right, knowing that she'd angered him, embarrassed him. If only she hadn't come here...

She raised one hand, half-clawed, toward the stage, a mute and pathetic plea for mercy, lenience, clemency. She knew she'd get none of those. Harry turned accusing eyes on her, and they seemed to blaze for an instant as green as the curse that struck him down.

"Kill me please. Kill me too, please," she said, as she struggled to keep her footing. Somehow he heard her above the thunderous echo of countless voices.

"No." He said, and smiled at her again, appreciating the nuance of his plan. "No. You get to live."

She shook her head in denial, her glazed eyes fixed on the stage, littered with bodies behind the grim row of smiling skulls. Harry... The noise buffeted her, rocked her, assailed her. She buckled, curling down into nothingness, buried under the swell of people.

Their cries of victory echoed in her ears.

"NO!" She shot up in the bed, coming awake even as she cried out, running shaking hands through sweat-soaked hair. Harry was almost instantly awake as well, sitting up and cradling her in an embrace, as she trembled in the comforting circle of his arms.

"Hey, hey, hey," he crooned, whispering soothingly into her hair. He had slept shirtless, and she splayed her hands wide over the planes of his chest, taking succor in his radiant warmth.

"I was at the rally," she hiccupped. "He killed you, but he let me live." She looked at him, agony beseeching him from her wide eyes. "But I didn't want to. I didn't want to."

"It was just a dream," Harry said, rolling his eyes at little, evidently appreciating the irony of their switched roles. "They can't hurt you – most of the time," he amended.

"It was so loud," she said in a vague voice. "And then he brought you out, and everyone was so happy, and somehow he knew I was there. I begged him to kill me too, and he just said, 'No.'"

"I'm not dead, Hermione. I'm right here." She looked at him suddenly, as if seeing him for the first time since she'd awakened, and their eyes locked.

"Yes... yes, you are here. You're here," she repeated, as if reassuring herself that it was true. Her fingers danced lightly across the planes of his chest, before her lips came up to meet his.

And then, so suddenly that she wasn't sure exactly how it happened, Hermione was prone on the mattress, with Harry poised above her, cradling her gently in his arms. They kissed rapidly, desperately, frantically. Hermione banished their pajamas, and Harry signaled his approval with an appreciative moan, as he kissed her more thoroughly still. Hands skimmed over warm skin, mouths worshipped at the altar of desire, and yet, somehow it was more than that, different from before, though it still echoed Hermione's stunted thought from the night before...here...now...

It was Affirmation of Life. Hermione had been surrounded with Death, pursued by it, desired by it, but she was not dead. Harry had been close to it, imprisoned by it, tempted toward it, but had not succumbed to it. They touched feverishly, hands splayed, as if they could not get enough skin beneath their questing fingers. Here...real...alive...

Alive... alive...alive... it seemed to pulse through Hermione's body, a rapid beat in time with her racing heart, matching them thrust for thrust, as they strove, searching, clutching, clinging, for the physical oneness, the emotional connection for which they both longed. Even after their passion had been spent, they remained locked together, each unwilling to let the other go.

"Harry..." Hermione said, winded and at a loss for words. She looked into his green eyes, so close to hers, and thought she would willingly drown in them. They crinkled at the corners, with an understanding smile, and he said only,

"I know."

They were alive. Other words were superfluous.

"Wait a minute," Lupin said, holding up one hand for Hermione to stop. He paused for a moment, and took a sip of scalding tea. "What are you saying – that Voldemort has mustered up some kind of – of army of Replicants?"

"You think something like that would be beyond him?" Tonks retorted acerbically. Lupin looked at her with reproach.

"Not on moral grounds, no," he said, his look clearly saying, and you knew that. "But practically speaking... there's almost no research surviving on the making of Effingi. After the practices was banned, it –"

"There was nearly no research on Horcruxes either," Harry spoke up, his voice icy with meaning. Lupin glanced at him briefly, and appeared to concede the point.

"What little I could find on such short notice," Hermione interposed, speaking rapidly, as was her wont, "seemed to indicate that as long as the – the original human being – the Prime – remains alive, then there is no limit to the number of Replicants that can be made."

"If what you're saying is true, then Voldemort is unstoppable," Lupin said grimly, paling as the promise of hope was leeched from him.

"Not exactly," Hermione said, her eyes coming alight with that frenetic enjoyment that always seemed to accompany learning and discovering. "The text seemed to indicate that the Prime was vital to the entire process, that you could not just make a copy of a copy, and so forth. If we found where Voldemort was hiding the Primes, and destroyed them, then..."

"No more army," Tonks finished, in a bewildered tone. Lupin was shaking his head, in the manner of one faced with an insurmountable, thoroughly intimidating task.

"If that's true, then Voldemort will have that place guarded more closely than anyone's ever thought about guarding anything before," he pointed out. Hermione regarded him for a moment, with grave, dark eyes, and nodded in agreement.

"You're absolutely right," she said. "But what other choice do we have?" She looked at Harry for a long moment, and they seemed to communicate without words. What other choice, indeed?

"It can't be any harder than finding and destroying six horcruxes, right?" Harry asked, in a weak attempt at levity. Hermione quirked a smile at him, knowing as clearly as he did that both of them realized that this time... they would not have Harry, Harry as he had once been, Harry at what had ended up being the height of his power. She thought she saw mute apology in his eyes, and she shook her head at him.

It's not your fault.

"How is Voldemort controlling them?" Lupin interjected suddenly, dashing away the moment. Hermione's forehead crinkled with the force of her earnest thought.

"I'm not sure. If he could control large numbers of people indefinitely, he'd probably just use Imperius. I personally think he's not controlling them at all." She began to speak faster again, over their incredulous looks. "Think about it," she said. "He picks out the stupidest, cruelest, most ignorant, and amoral among his followers, and uses them to make Effingi. Technically, they have as much freewill as the Prime, but the highest probability is that they will think and act in the same way that the Prime always has."

"And..." Tonks began slowly, clearly thinking of her conversation with Lucius Malfoy, "Voldemort's own inner circle refuses to make Effingi. Is this their idea? Or Voldemort's – to keep from having too many ambitious, intelligent, possible usurpers in his ranks?"

"I'm sure that Voldemort let them think it was their idea," Hermione replied. "It also answers why Voldemort would not want to make

Effingi of any of the Order. The likelihood of one of us being able to be turned from the way we normally live and think and act is so low as to make the risk hardly worth it. That's why I think Neville – " she caught herself and stopped abruptly. The others – even Harry – goggled at her slightly.

"You think Neville is an Effingus?" Tonks breathed, in barely a whisper. Hermione cast a self-conscious look at Harry, and began to list all the reasons that Neville had attracted her suspicions.

"I think he was an experiment. I think Neville was replaced by an Effingus in that closet, while Luna was Stunned. I don't think Luna has any real idea how long she was in that closet. I think they tried to program Neville, and there's something in his water to make him more... acquiescent ... to their way of thinking. I also think it's not working well. He's starting to act erratically – the way he cast early the night you – " she winced apologetically toward Remus, "nearly escaped. I think that he was instructed to somehow let you loose – once he'd told them that you were the Secret Keeper – hoping that you'd injure or kill one of us, and maybe be driven from the safehouse in despair."

"Right into their waiting arms, I'm sure..." Remus finished for her grimly.

"He tampered with the wards, but then his plan went awry," she continued. "He was going to cast early, and clearly broadcast his intentions. It's as if he wanted to be stopped. His inherent nature as Neville is fighting with what they've tried to program him to be."

"Does that mean – ?" Harry began, but he never got a chance to finish his sentence, interrupted by a sudden clamor on the stairs.

"It's not true. It's not true!" An irate Neville burst into the War Room, his face reddened with anger, betrayal, and fear. Hermione regarded him with some sadness and a little pity.

"How did you know what we were talking about, Neville?" she asked calmly. When he did not respond, she persisted, "You've put some sort of listening charm in the War Room, haven't you? It was in the

infirmary, and that's what I heard that day, isn't it? Though I'm sure you've moved it by now...maybe into your bedroom? Ron's a heavy sleeper."

"Why – why would I have to – I'm – everyone trusts me," Neville blustered, looking more petrified by the minute. "I wouldn't have any need to plant anything anywhere, when I could hear it firsthand."

"Not if you're recording it...and sending it off by Owl to Death Eaters," Hermione continued, unfazed, and with a biting tone in her voice. Neville shook his head wildly.

"I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't..."

"What's in your water, Neville?" Hermione asked, the gentle tone returning, as she tried to sound disarming.

"It's just water," he mumbled.

"It's charmed to look like water," Hermione corrected. "But nothing spilled out that day I knocked your bottle over, remember? What is it, Neville?"

Neville slumped then, and buried his face in his hands.

"I don't know," he moaned. "I don't know. They send me refills by Owl, and I send the recordings. I – I'm just supposed to drink it, and somehow it's easier."

"Easier to do what?"

"To do what they tell me to do," Neville said vaguely, before suddenly snapping back to himself. "But I can't be. I can't be what you said."

"Why not, Neville?" Hermione asked blandly.

"Because I remember!" Neville's voice was hoarse, and sounded tear-clogged. "I remember what happened to my parents. I remember living with Gran – and being bounced down the lane by my uncle, and going to Hogwarts, and losing Trevor. Harry saved my Remembrall. I

took Ginny to the Yule Ball. I fought with the D. A. twice. I.... I am Neville Longbottom. I have to be... I have to be....”

The other four in the War Room looked at Neville with a mixture of compassion and revulsion. It was Harry who stepped over to his side, and placed one hand on the other boy’s shoulder companionably.

“Of course, you’re Neville. They’re trying to control you, but they’re failing. You haven’t done any real harm yet. But you’re going to have to tell us everything,” his amiable tone was replaced by an intense one. “What do they know about us?”

A loud rapping on the door awakened Harry and Hermione from a sound sleep, tightly entwined around each other, in the middle of the night. Instinctively, Hermione shrank down under the sheets, but only Ron’s voice, sounding rough and frayed around the edges, issued through the door,

“It’s Percy... you -- you’d better come...he’s asking for you...” Harry and Hermione exchanged alarmed glances, and flung themselves out of the bed, dressing quickly. The entire house was dark, and seemed to be poised, waiting... but when they got to the infirmary, light spilled out into the corridor, half-blinding them.

From what Hermione could see through her starry eyes, the entire Order was assembled. Fleur was sitting up on her bed, with her legs dangling over the sides, watching Percy tremble and mutter, her eyes filled with tears and one hand splayed protectively over her abdomen, as if she still could not believe it. Mr. Weasley was perched in a chair at Percy’s side, looking as gray and old as if he’d aged a decade in two days. Ron had obviously just entered, and he and Fred had ranged themselves at the foot of Percy’s bed, like sentinels. Penelope sat on Percy’s other side, clasping one of his hands in both of hers.

Hermione cast a silent look at Tonks and Lupin, as they arrived at the infirmary door at the same time.

“He’s going,” McGonagall whispered from her post near the door. “The deterioration has reached his organs. There’s nothing else we can do.” Hermione poised on the balls of her feet, rocking back and

forth uncomfortably. She felt out of place here, like she didn't belong, and her eyes tripped nervously from one somber face to the next. She saw Ginny, prone, unconscious due to heavy sedation, and she felt a momentary pang that her estranged brother was in the next bed over...dying...and Ginny would never know.

"Harry?" called a rough, raspy voice, with effort. Harry's feet propelled him unevenly into the room, where he continued until he was in Percy's line of sight. "Wanted to ...say'm sorry... 'bout ...Min'stry...all of it."

"Percy..." Harry spoke quickly, trying to explain that it was unnecessary, that the old feud had been abandoned in the light of more important things, but in Percy's eyes beneath the shadow of death, gleamed the desire to say this, to make things right before the end.

"N – no," Percy raised one hand weakly, and Harry clasped it, but not before Hermione noticed that the dull gray tinge extended now to Percy's extremities. The edges of his fingernails were nearly black. "Should've known....should've believed you... I – I could've helped, done something...could have..."

"It's forgotten, Percy," Harry said. "Everyone makes mistakes, and I assure you...it is forgotten." The skeletal smile glimmered briefly across Percy's sunken features again, and he sucked in a noisy breath with a kind of ah-ahh sound, obviously in pain.

"D – dad? Ron? F – fre – " his voice failed him, and he went into a spasm of coughing, even though the reflexive action clearly agonized him.

"It's been said, son. Don't fret yourself over it," Mr. Weasley said, speaking in a quavering voice. Ron and Fred nodded in agreement, as Ron tried to dash away sudden, hot tears with the back of one hand.

"Fleur?" he choked out, with difficulty, and his sister-in-law moved gracefully to his bedside, kneeling beside him near her father-in-law.

“Take – take care... that baby.” Hermione watched Fleur’s eyes brim with tears, as she nodded.

“You saved me, Percy... me and the baby. I shall not forget it. And tell B – Bill – will you? – about his child...and how very much I love him.” Percy smiled again, not with his mouth, as the effort cost him too much, but with his eyes.

“I’ll... tell...” Another spasm of pain cut off the end of his sentence, and he obviously used all his effort to turn his head toward Penelope, who smiled a bright, watery smile at him. “Penn...” She laid one finger on his darkening lips to shush him, and ran her fingers through his hair, almost maternally.

“I know, Percy. I love you too,” she said softly, able to only achieve a whisper, without completely breaking down. His body stiffened again with convulsive pain, and his eyes closed. Hermione thought that was the end, and clutched Harry’s hand, when he returned to her side.

But then Percy opened his eyes again, and raised one hand, reaching for something that no one else could see, looking through them, looking beyond them, and his smile wreathed his battered, decaying face.

“Mum? Everyone?” he whispered, “I’m home.”

TBC

Urgh...this chapter gave me fits. I revamped it two different times, after it had already been half completed. I know “nothing much happened”, but I hope it showed some of the after-effects that the rally had on them.

More on Neville...and Ginny... next chapter.

Lorien

Chapter Thirteen: Maneuvers

Hermione stood stiffly next to Harry, in that not-quite-touching way that the two of them seemed to have perfected. She had her hair back in a binding charm again, and only short tendrils were blowing about her face. Wispy clouds scudded across an azure sky, and the pleasant breeze from the ocean bore no hint that autumn would soon be upon them.

It was August now. Three days after Harry's birthday, and he was burying his parents...again. She glanced at him anxiously, but his eyes were fixed on the scarred ground. Mr. Weasley, Remus, and Ron began to lower the single casket into the place prepared for it, their wands moving in a touching synchrony.

Harry's posture was rigid, radiating tension. His face was pale, his eyes obscured by his glasses, a Darkening charm shielding him from the sun. His mouth was set in a thin, tight line.

One casket. It's rather poetic, in a way, Hermione thought, a trifle ruefully. Tonks had hesitantly come to Harry, apologizing for the way she – she'd choked over the word 'remains' – had gotten shuffled together in her pack. There was a charm, she informed him; she could sort them out, but it would take a while.

Don't worry about it, Harry had said to the concerned Auror. Leave them...together. His voice had strangled over the last word, and he had beaten a hasty retreat from the room. Several hours later, Hermione had found him sitting in the garret beneath the window, his face tight with sorrow, as if it had been etched from stone by a sad and angry sculptor.

The casket was in place, and Remus glanced toward Harry, an obvious question in his eyes. Harry nodded once, jerkily, and Remus lifted his wand again. One flick, and a fine mist of dirt spewed from the end, spattering softly across the polished wood of the coffin. After a moment, Hermione and Tonks joined him, and the other Order members soon followed, until a small mound of earth had been formed and the casket obscured from sight. Mr. Weasley and Fred

began to levitate a marble tombstone into place at the head of the grave.

Hermione watched Harry covertly, noticing how the sun glinted off of the dampness on his cheeks. Wizarding funerary tradition called for the nearest family member to begin the burial, as Remus had done. It had been yet another symbol – to Harry – of his powerlessness, that he could not perform even this simple task in memory of the parents who had died that he might live. Hermione's lips compressed sympathetically, noting how Harry seemed to be all harsh lines and jutting angles.

Fred had been up very late for the last couple of nights, the Carving beam on his wand honed to a razor's edge, preparing the tombstone. It read simply:

James and Lily Potter

Life and Love Brought Them Together

Death Did Not Part Them

1959-1981

An uneven gasp escaped Harry's slightly parted lips, and Hermione reached for him, threading her fingers through his. She felt his hand tense, as if he would pull it away, but he must have quelled the urge to withdraw from her – from everybody – for his hand remained twined with hers.

The attention of the Order then turned to the second gash in the earth, parallel to the first, gleaming luridly in the slanting afternoon sun. After Percy's coffin had been lowered into place, it was Mr. Weasley who began to fill the hole, followed by Ron and Fred. Penelope soon followed suit, her face nearly as flinty as Harry's, her eyes noticeably damp. Another tombstone was secured, this one bearing the words:

Percival Ignatius Weasley

Beloved Son, Brother, and Friend

With the Heart of a Lion

August 22, 1976 – August 1, 1998

Mr. Weasley spoke a few halting words in a barely audible voice, while his sons looked studiously down at their shoes with red-rimmed eyes. Hermione tried to distract herself from the tightness in her chest and her pricking eyelids, by tripping her gaze over the other Order members. Harry was nearest, filling a good bit of her vision, back-lit by the sun, looking as unmoving and implacable as a statue. She wasn't sure if he was looking in her direction behind his tinted spectacles, but she shot him a warning look anyway. Don't you dare try to shut me out, Harry. McGonagall was on his other side, sniffing decorously into a starched and prim white lace hanky. Hermione paused here, regarding the professor whom she'd always seen as stoic – even dour – a comparison, she realized now that might have been less than fair. She'd heard the old adage that parents should never bury their children, and she wondered if McGonagall felt that way about burying former students.

Then she saw the gray face of Mr. Weasley, and knew that there was no comparison at all – and he hadn't even been able to say good-bye to most of the family that was no more. Ron had put his arm gently around Penelope, who looked very close to breaking down completely, and Fred stood a little apart, his face so solemn and set that he almost didn't look like himself. Fleur stood beside him, managing to look regally beautiful as always, even with undeniable grief stamped on her features. On the far side of the newly-made graves stood Remus and Tonks. Lupin looked as if a stiff breeze would knock him over, and Hermione reflected that this interring of his friends once again had to be like clawing open wounds that had only been partially healed. Tonks had one arm around Remus' waist, and was dry-eyed, but pensive.

Penelope tried to speak when Mr. Weasley had finished, but could not manage it. Fleur stepped in with that aplomb that she seemed to always have on hand, though her chin quivered slightly while she was speaking. Hermione's gaze locked on the Frenchwoman's slender, healing hand, unconsciously splayed across her abdomen. Fleur's

words washed over her meaninglessly like water. How on earth are we going to keep a pregnant woman safe? Hermione wondered, and yet she knew without asking that every last member of the Order would give their lives for this baby – this unexpected symbol of better days before, a promise of better days to come – without thinking twice.

Well, maybe not everyone, she amended, thinking of who was not present at the funeral service. Ginny was missing, of course, still incapacitated by the Nightmare curse. But it was Neville's absence that Hermione felt most keenly. He was locked in one of the empty bedrooms, with Luna keeping watch.

"What have you told them?" Harry asked again, his voice growing more insistent as Neville balked.

"I – I – " Neville stammered, his hands drifting almost aimlessly up to his temples, shaking his head, as if disagreeing with an opinion that no one else had heard.

Harry snorted air out through his nostrils, and raked Neville with a disdainful look.

"Now I know you're not Neville. He never would have betrayed us this way." Harry's tone was scathing. Neville jerked his chin up, and met Harry's gaze almost defiantly. Hermione watched pensively. She would have prepared to intervene, but Harry couldn't do much to Neville before she and Lupin would be all over him.

"I haven't betrayed you," Neville said, albeit slowly and with great difficulty.

"Prove it," Harry bit off the words challengingly, obviously channeling Draco Malfoy with every ounce of contempt he could muster. Hermione was sure that the reluctant admiration, warring with worry and compassion for the real Neville (wherever he was), was evident in her eyes. "Tell us when they took the real Neville. When did you replace him?" Neville looked at Harry with an injured air, as if Harry'd hurt his feelings.

“At...the hospital...” Neville ground out, evidently fighting some instinct shrieking in his head for him to shut the hell up. He looked almost surprised, as if he’d had no idea of these facts until they crossed his lips. “Luna – they tried – her clone didn’t take...just me. Just...” He grimaced, shaking his head, looking almost like Dobby bent on self-flagellation. “It’s all jumbled up...”

“Where were you?” Harry pressed, and Neville recoiled away from him.

“I don’t know. I can’t remember... it’s – Malfoy’s dad was – aahh!” He arched suddenly, crying out and then bending nearly double.

“Where were you?” Harry’s eyes were blazing, and an involuntary

“Harry!” flew from Hermione’s lips without her really meaning it to.

“He couldn’t reveal the location of the house. The Fidelius precludes that,” Remus put in matter-of-factly, obviously hoping to allay some of Harry’s panic.

“Is he even under the Fidelius?” Harry asked, whirling toward Remus and Tonks, who shrugged helplessly.

“There’s no way to know how the Fidelius would affect a clone. He’s – he’s the same person as – as – the charm probably just reads him as Neville. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have been able to enter the house after the raid at St. Mungo’s,” she said.

“What have you told them?” Harry asked, his tone still impatiently frantic and angry.

“I – I didn’t – ” Neville stammered, glancing wildly around the room, as if fearing punishment by some unseen watcher. Harry swore violently, causing everyone in the room to look askance at him. Hermione wondered at his vehement reaction, and supposed that Neville – whether deserving or not – was going to be on the receiving end of all Harry’s guilt, grief, uselessness, fear, and despair.

Harry turned back toward the others, seeming to dismiss Neville out of hand, apparently realizing that they might not get any useful information from him.

“We’re going to have to lock him up,” he said, not terribly apologetically. “He can’t be allowed to communicate with the Death Eaters.”

“If we cut off his communication,” Hermione said quietly, “then they’ll know he’s been compromised. They’ll know we know.” Her eyes drifted slowly from Harry to Neville. “We’re better off letting him communicate – as long as it’s what we’ve carefully selected.” Harry glanced at Neville, then over to Hermione. He seemed to be agreeing reluctantly.

“I guess you’re right,” he assented. The Order then collectively dictated a letter to Neville, which the desperate boy had taken down, while held at wandpoint, informing the Death Eaters that his recording charm had been detected and disabled, and a new ward set up which would prevent further charms of that sort. He indicated that he had nearly been apprehended, but that the Order could not conceive that one of their own would betray them. He told them that the escaped prisoners had both succumbed to their injuries, and that Harry appeared to be as strong as ever, having completely overcome the effects of the dampening field.

That had been yesterday. Neville had been kept in near total isolation since then, with someone carefully guarding the door. They had been keeping a weather eye out for owls, but nothing had arrived. Neville was still vacillating from insisting he hadn’t done anything to sitting in stony silence. Hermione wondered when the effect of the potion would wear off, and when the refill would arrive.

She looked around suddenly, as the mourners began to disperse from the new gravesides. The service had ended, and she hadn’t even realized it. She caught Harry’s knowing glance on her, in the instant before he caught her hand in his again.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and her mouth twisted involuntarily at the irony of his asking her that question.

"I'm fine," she tried to say in her most innocuous tone, but she could feel the penetrating gaze behind the tinted glasses. Harry's chief concern had been that she was going to kill herself working so ceaselessly for the Order, and she could see that worry lurking in the watchful lines of his face.

"You came to bed awfully late last night," he observed, and she felt herself flushing, as she glanced to see if anyone had heard his casual mention of their sleeping arrangements. Hermione was fairly sure that most people were aware of it, but it had never been mentioned – even as no one had brought up that Tonks and Remus were sharing a room. And if Ron, who had awakened Harry the night Percy died, had even noticed that Hermione had come with him, he had said nothing about it.

"There's so much to do," she said looking at him apologetically. "How can I, in good conscience, not do everything that is possible for me to do?"

Harry dug his hands into his pockets, and scuffed at a patch of dirt with one toe of his battered trainers. Hermione thought she could see the faint rust of a bloodstain near the heel.

"I just..." his eyes drifted over her shoulder to where Mr. Weasley stood with his two remaining sons. And then Hermione understood. He was going to ask her to do something else, and he had decided to feel guilty beforehand.

"You know I'd do anything you asked of me, don't you?" She said gently, coming close enough to put one hand on his chest and look up into his face.

"That doesn't mean I should ask it of you," he countered, watching the Weasleys with an unreadable expression on his face. The trio of redheads filed past them into the house, Mr. Weasley placing a comforting pat on Harry's shoulder, as he passed by. Ron passed them carefully, without so much as a flicker of his eyes in their direction, his arm still carefully around Penelope, as if she were made

of spun glass. The rest of the Order followed suit, with Remus giving one lingering look toward the two forlorn graves.

“What is it, Harry?” she persisted, once the back door had closed behind Professor McGonagall.

“I’ve been thinking about...Mr. Weasley, and – and how much – how much he’s lost, and – I – I don’t want him to lose anymore. I – ” He looked down once into Hermione’s beseeching eyes, and then plunged ahead. “I want to fix Ginny.”

Hermione remained silent, electing not to ask the obvious and insulting question, “how?” Then she said, carefully,

“What did you have in mind?” The brief flash of gratitude in his gaze told her that she’d said the right thing.

“I was thinking... if we worked together again, like how we Stunned Remus... then maybe we could disable the curse.” His voice sounded fumbling and uncertain, and he appeared ready for a Hermione-esque list of exactly why that was an absurd suggestion. As if hoping to head her off, he added quickly, “I know it’s dangerous for you, and I’ve no right to ask, but – but if – if – your power through me is more than – ”

“The sum of its parts?” Hermione inserted quietly, and Harry nodded.

“Then maybe we can accomplish what would otherwise take a team of specialists and access to St. Mungo’s.” He looked a little self-deprecating, as if realizing how foolish it sounded. “Penelope doesn’t think she can go on much longer, without the effects being permanent. She’s woken up once more on her own, and was having trouble even remembering the names of her brothers. Penelope thinks that her – her memories are starting to erode,” he said haltingly, wincing a little. “She didn’t want to say anything to Mr. Weasley so soon after – after Percy...”

“Do you think she’ll be able to handle the reality of the situation? Assuming we can fix it at all?” Hermione asked candidly. Harry looked bleakly out toward the horizon.

“She’ll have to, won’t she? If she wants to survive.” He sighed heavily, and appeared to be on the verge of saying something else, when he stopped suddenly, and peered intently into the sky.

“Harry?” Hermione asked, mystified, following his gaze.

“Do you see...?”

“Yes,” she breathed before he could finish. “What the hell is that?”

High above them, the sky was... well, rippling, for lack of a better word, much like the tranquil surface of a pond, disturbed by a lobbed stone. Hermione felt her unease grow, as they followed the ripple, which grew larger and closer, and then began to ripple in front of treetops and the highest gable of the safehouse.

“It’s Neville’s owl,” Harry gulped. “Get Remus!” Hermione paused to marvel that they’d disillusioned an owl, and scrambled up the steps, calling out to the Order before they’d even crossed the threshold.

Obviously, the owls had not had any difficulty finding Neville as yet, not being including under the Fidelius, as they were incapable of giving away a location. Nor could their magical means of travel – a crude form of Apparation over long distances – be tracked. Hermione worried that this did not eliminate the possibility of the owl being charmed – or given some kind of amulet – that would act as Neville’s recording charm had. After all, as she’d grimly told Harry the day before, just because Voldemort couldn’t know exactly where their safehouse was, didn’t mean he couldn’t obliterate the entire region to get to them. In fact, Fred had gone with Ron into the nearest village the day before, and came back, urgently informing them that they had seen a small squadron of Death Eaters, trying to be covert, but obvious nonetheless.

“Neville’s given them Cornwall, at least,” Remus had said grimly. “They’re probably looking for signs of wizarding activity.”

“Are we still safe here?” McGonagall had queried. “The safehouse in York would...”

“They’re already overcrowded. In fact, they may be asking us to take in some overflow soon. Both houses have been rather reluctant because there are so – so many...er – high-ranking Order members here,” Tonks stumbled to an ungainly halt, glancing rather shamefacedly at Harry.

The decision had been made to stay – at least for the time being, and future trips to the village, if necessary, would be made with the utmost caution.

When Harry and Hermione arrived at the room where Neville was being detained, they saw Remus and Tonks standing in the corridor, carefully out of line of sight of the doorway.

“He’s giving the owl the message,” Remus said in a low whisper, mindful of possible monitoring charms.

“Where’s Luna?” Hermione hissed, not liking the inability to see exactly what Neville was doing.

“She’s a smart girl,” Remus said, a tinge of admiration in his tone. “She’s got Harry’s cloak. He’s at wandpoint – he’d be a fool to try anything.”

There was an audible whoosh of feathery wings pumping against air, and the owl was gone. As they cautiously entered the room, they were presented with the picture of Neville reluctantly placing a package in a disembodied hand, outstretched and palm up.

The hand then gripped the package and swung in a wide arc.

“Hermione?” Nothing said, proffering her the package.

“Thanks, Luna,” Hermione said, dazedly, as Luna did not seem at all inclined to remove the invisibility cloak, even though the owl had departed. Devoid of its brown paper wrapping, it was a simple cardboard box, containing a cork-stoppered glass bottle (protected by a cushioning charm), in which an effervescent golden fluid

shimmered. Harry speared Neville with a hostile glance, before looking at Hermione for confirmation.

“We should destroy it, just to be safe,” he said.

“I disagree,” Hermione said, and Tonks concurred. “We should find out what it is – what its purpose is and what its components are. It might help us figure out how Voldemort is making the Effingi.” Faced with that kind of logic, Harry nodded curtly, though still clearly not pleased with that potion being in any vicinity of Neville at all.

“Was there anything else?” Hermione asked, looking not at Neville, but at the empty space where Luna was.

“No,” came her slightly muffled voice, after a pause, during which Hermione figured she’d probably been shaking her head undetected.

“Good. We’ll let Voldemort chew on that information, and see how he likes it,” Hermione declared in a satisfied tone. She felt Harry slump a little behind her, and figured he was wishing that the false intelligence was true – at least as far as his powers were concerned. Her gaze raked over the mostly empty room, barely skimming over Neville, who looked particularly disheartened.

“Whose turn is it to watch him?” she asked.

“Ron said he would do it next,” Luna said.

“Let’s go get him,” Hermione responded, nudging Harry gently in the side with her elbow. This, at least, would force Ron to interact with them minimally, something he had been assiduously avoiding.

“I’m not going to do anything!” Neville burst out in frustration, looking at them with pleading, resentful eyes.

“That’s right. You’re not,” Hermione answered him, before shrugging slightly. “This may not be your fault, N – Neville, but you can’t blame us for reacting this way, can you?” She stumbled a little over his name, realizing that he wasn’t really the Neville they’d known for seven years, but recovered admirably.

Neville sat on the edge of the sagging mattress, elbows on knees, looking despondent.

“No,” he said heavily, looking at the weathered floorboards. “I s’pose not.”

Hermione had stuck her head in the infirmary doorway to say something to Mr. Weasley, feeling bad about her inattentiveness at Percy’s service, even if Harry was the only one who’d really noticed. Consequently, when she arrived in the War Room, Harry was pleading with Ron – and not about Neville. Their voices drifted to her ears before she had even reached the bottom of the stairs.

“So this is how it’s going to be, then? You’re not even going to look at me.” Harry’s voice was quiet, almost resigned, but Hermione could hear the undercurrent of anger and despair threading through it.

There was a moment of silence.

“There. Satisfied?” Ron’s voice was faintly sarcastic. He had probably turned and fixed Harry with some kind of pointed bug-eyed gaze. Hermione shook her head and rolled her eyes. She had once said that Ron had the emotional range of a teaspoon, but she had long ago come to see that she was wrong. Ron did feel things, very deeply, but was ill at ease showing it. He often covered up uncertainty or even affection in her case, with sarcasm, humor, and anger. These were his safety valves, whereas Harry had been conditioned in his childhood to hold it in until he exploded. Hence his Aunt Marge and his outburst upon his arrival at Grimmauld Place fifth year. Hermione liked to think that she had both her “boys” figured out, and she feared that Ron was going to act like an idiot until Harry had a fit. Her heart could not help but twinge, however, since, in all of their many spats, Ron had never sounded so tired and defeated.

“So why’d you really come down here?” Ron asked. “Let’s face it, you haven’t been seeking me out any more than I have either of you.”

“Ron...we wanted to give you time – space – to process everything, but we miss you. We both hate that – ”

“We?” There was a bitter laugh, and Hermione, still frozen in the hallway, flinched. “Oh that’s rich, Harry. You two speak for each other now? Tight little Duo? You’re better off with her anyway. What do you need me for?”

“I can’t believe you even have to ask me that. After everything...” Harry’s voice was very quiet, and fairly vibrating with intense emotion.

“Everything’s changed.” Ron’s voice was heavy, and Hermione knew he was talking about more than just their defunct relationship.

“You think I don’t know that? Everything that’s happened in the last two months has been because of me! All those people...” Harry’s voice cracked, and Hermione found herself instinctively moving toward the doorway, but she checked herself.

“You didn’t start the war, Harry,” came Ron’s voice, in the tone of one who has repeated himself innumerable times. “It’s not your fault that he chose you. I just wish she hadn’t.” The last sentence was said so low that Hermione nearly didn’t catch it. She found herself pressing her hand to her mouth, so that no sound would escape.

“Ron...I’m sorry. I didn’t plan for this to happen; I – ”

“But it did happen,” Ron finished for him.

“Yes,” Harry replied simply. There was another silence, and Hermione sidled toward the door.

“Are you sleeping with her?” The question hung out in the tense air, sandwiched in between two periods of thunderous silence. Hermione froze, unsure whether to be annoyed, offended, or worried, or all three. She waited for Harry to bluster that it was none of Ron’s business or something similar, but instead she heard another simple,

“Yes.” Hermione’s eyes slid shut. Ron said something under his breath that she didn’t catch. “I’m not going to lie to you, Ron. She’s so – ” He stopped and sighed, as if he could not find sufficient words. “I love her. There is nothing more important to me than her well-being

and happiness... And I know that's important to you too." Ron grunted something that might have been agreement.

"What'm I supposed to say, Harry? Congratulations? All last summer, I – we – Merlin, Harry, I tried. And none of it was good enough. None of it made her happy. And now, we're holed up here, and there's nowhere to go, and almost everyone's dead, and I have to see you two... her, happy – knowing that I couldn't do that. It hurts. Especially with – with everything else..."

"I'm sorry that this hurt you. It's the last thing in the world either of us want, you have to believe that. But I'm not sorry for loving her. And I never will be."

"I wouldn't expect you to," Ron said, and Hermione thought she detected a faint tinge of reluctant admiration in his tone. There was another silence, and Harry cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Listen... I wanted to ask you for a favor," he stammered. "Hermione – well, she's escaped Voldemort twice, and he knows that she – that we – he knows our feelings. I expect he'll find me eventually, and there's not going to be a whole lot I can do to stop him. I mean, I'm – I'm probably going to die before this is all over."

"Harry – " Ron protested.

"Will you look after her for me? If anything happens? I know she can take care of herself, but I would feel better if – "

"You know I will." There was a quiet kind of dignity in Ron's voice, and Hermione supposed that he really had grown up.

"If it – if things start looking ... bad," Harry said, a kind of hesitance in his voice, as if he were unsure of exactly how to proceed. "Will you get her away from it? Ensure her safety? No matter what it takes?"

The moment seemed to hang heavily between the two boys, and Ron did not answer immediately, evidently trying to take in the gist of Harry's meaning. Without really thinking before she did it, Hermione finally stepped into the War Room, startling them both.

"You can't ask that of him, Harry. You've no right." She was almost smiling as she spoke, her voice firm, but her eyes misty.

"Hermione, I just want to know that you'll be safe – no matter what," Harry defended.

"You'll be asking Ron to abandon the fight, just to escort me away. You'll be asking me to leave, regardless of the outcome or consequences. I won't do that." She sounded just as decisive as he had, when rejected her suggestion of a magical transfer.

"You know what will happen if Voldemort captures you!" Harry's voice was pleading. "You know what he'll do. You saw." Hermione swallowed convulsively, acknowledging the truth in Harry's words.

"I know," she said softly. "And I won't abandon anyone fighting for the Light... even if it's hopeless, even if you – if you – " She couldn't say it. "You wouldn't ever leave them. Don't ask it of us."

Harry watched himself shuffle his feet. The unruly black fringe of his bangs flopped forward and obscured his eyes from her.

"I just – " I just want you to be okay. I just want you to live. I think I could handle dying, if I knew you were going to be alright. These unspoken statements fairly leapt from his eyes, when he finally lifted his face again to look at her.

"I know, Harry," she said softly. She knew that nobody was promised tomorrow, or even the next heartbeat, but somehow she felt like they were at more of a disadvantage than most. She knew that, at this point, the likelihood of any of them surviving was small, and Harry was under even a greater threat. Add to that, his loss of magic, and it was no wonder that he felt like he should resign himself to his fate. She found herself stepping over to face him, and she placed both of her hands on his shoulders.

"Don't decide to die on me just yet, okay?" She tried to lighten her words with a watery smile, but there was a definite sheen to her eyes that gave her gravity away. Harry let out a breath of almost-laughter,

and he smiled a little as well. Both of them seemed to have forgotten Ron was in the room, until they all whirled at the sound of a new voice coming from the fireplace.

The limited-access Floo network had finally been rigged up and deemed usable by Tonks and Fred. It connected only to the two safehouses, one in York, and the other near the Scottish border. Even so, there had been limited networking between the three houses beyond exchange of news. Hermione figured that everyone was still a little jumpy and nervous, and busy dealing with their own internal problems.

A familiar face floated greenly in the flames.

“Oh, it’s you three! Hallo!” came the voice, cheerily enough. Hermione, Ron, and Harry exchanged amazed glances.

“A – Aberforth...” Harry stammered uncertainly. None of the Trio had ever been particularly clear on what to call him, as Mr. Dumbledore just sounded off somehow, and the man himself actually expressed a preference for Abe, which Hermione steadfastly refused to call him. She had been none too happy whenever the boys tried it either. Ron had used to try it out every now and then, just to watch her twitch.

“Harry...it’s good to see you,” the older man, who looked uncannily like their late headmaster, sans beard, said, infusing a world of meaning into that one word.

“Where have you been?” Ron said, blurting out the question that all three of them had probably been thinking. Aberforth Dumbledore had been one of those missing, presumed dead, following the battle at Hogsmeade. He had made acquaintance with the Trio at the beginning of their seventh year, when he undertook Harry’s extracurricular training at his brother’s behest.

“I was in the Hog’s Head when it blew up,” Aberforth’s head said. “Laid in the rubble for a couple of days, before I came to long enough to make it to some Muggle farmhouse. Nice old man and his wife.” Hermione smothered a smile at his calling anybody ‘old’. “Anyway, a falling beam ‘bout took my leg off. Got all infected, and they tell me I was out of my head with fever. Took me this long to come to my

senses, and figure out how to find the Order. Just got here this morning. Made 'em let me use the Floo, soon as I found out you were still okay. Figured we'd need to get back on our training regimen, as soon as possible." Before he'd finished his last sentence, Harry was shaking his head, uncomfortably.

"Actually, no, I'm not going to be able to – " he began, while Hermione and Ron cast him covert sympathetic looks. But Aberforth continued on, as if Harry were not speaking at all. He was looking over his shoulder, talking to someone that they could not see.

"Need to speak to Minerva too. Is she about? We've found Poppy Pomfrey, you see. Wasn't she looking for her?"

"I'll get her," Ron offered, uncoiling himself from his crouched position before the fireplace, and sprinting from the room.

"Why the glum faces?" Aberforth asked perceptively, thought somewhat belatedly. "Poppy's not been found too late, has she?" Hermione's mind flitted over the thought of Percy and the painstakingly carved tombstone in the backyard, but she shook her head in the negative.

"No," she said slowly, thinking of Ginny screaming, blind eyes roving wildly, clutching at Harry's hand as if to a lifeline. "No, there's still someone that we need her to see."

"Well, that's good then," Aberforth said. "Now, Harry, about your training – "

"Haven't they told you?" Harry interrupted bluntly. "I can't – "

"Harry!" Hermione hissed warningly, grabbing his arm. "You shouldn't say anything over the Floo, even if it is a secure connection." Aberforth's eyes darted back and forth between them for a moment, and he seemed to read something there, for he said only,

"I see," and subsided. Barely an instant later, Ron reentered the War Room, with Professor McGonagall in tow.

“Why, Aberforth!” She said in amazement, when she saw whose head hovered in the grate. “We thought you’d – ”

“I haven’t,” he said, before she could finish the patently obvious statement. His eyes twinkled, even in the flames, and Hermione was suddenly and painfully reminded of his brother. The excited teenagers quickly filled their old professor in, and she said in a voice near delight, “Poppy’s there?”

“Standin’ right next to me,” Aberforth said jovially. “Who is it?” he added, the good humor suddenly extinguished from his eyes. McGonagall and the Trio grew equally grave.

“Ginny Weasley,” the former Headmistress said. “Does Poppy have any other supplies that we might not have?” Someone muscled Aberforth aside then, and the serene visage of their school nurse appeared in the Floo.

“Actually, I have,” she answered. “My cousin ran a small wizarding clinic. It was out in the middle of nowhere, and the Death Eaters hadn’t noticed it at all. He was killed in Diagon Alley, and I’ve cleaned him out. It won’t be as good as St. Mungo’s, but ...” she shrugged her shoulders.

“We’ll bring her through,” Harry said suddenly, his gaze locking with Hermione’s. She read the unspoken intent in his eyes, and nodded. He wanted to discuss the possibility of their combined efforts countering the curse that had been enacted on Ginny. There were few who knew the range of either Harry’s or Hermione’s powers better than Madam Pomfrey... or Aberforth Dumbledore, for that matter.

McGonagall opened her mouth to say something, and Ron appeared mystified, but Harry’s stubborn gaze challenged anyone to gainsay him.

“We’ll be expecting you,” said Madam Pomfrey, as soothingly as if she were tending to a feverish first-year. Harry nodded resolutely, his eyes blank, his features an inscrutable mask.

In the end, Penelope and Ron accompanied them through the Floo to the safehouse in Northern England. Fred had offered to take Ron's shift guarding Neville, so that his brother could accompany his friends and baby sister. Mr. Weasley had wanted to go as well, and, partially because of the guarded look in Harry's eyes, and partially because it was true, Tonks had gently requested that he stay, to prevent any safehouse from being undermanned at any one time – just in case.

Hermione gave herself over to the odd swirling sensation as she stepped into the Floo, and then out into a small parlor that had been set up for purposes similar to their own War Room. A genuine smile wreathed her face as she saw Madam Pomfrey and Aberforth waiting for them.

Harry came through behind her, cradling Ginny gently in his arms. He had obviously inhaled at exactly the wrong time, for he was coughing in that suppressed way that one uses when one is trying to minimize movement. Hermione tried to squelch the feeling of jealousy that licked through her, even as she thought derisively that it wasn't like Harry was going to wake Ginny up by coughing – there was no need to be careful of it.

Ron and Penelope followed them, and when they were all through, Madam Pomfrey turned to the Ravenclaw, all business.

"What's been done to her?" she asked. Penelope began to fill her in, as they trooped through the house, into a large room obviously used as an infirmary. It was much better equipped than the one in Cornwall, and Hermione thought that it had once been a very large dining room, with polished wood floors and a modest crystal chandelier overhead. Floor-to-ceiling windows lined one wall, and Hermione supposed that behind the draperies, they opened out onto some kind of veranda.

Madam Pomfrey was shaking her head regretfully, eyes on Ginny, as Hermione turned her attention back to the matter at hand.

"Is there anything you know of that could help?" Penelope asked with large, anxious eyes. "The Nightmare Curses are so new – I really, I don't know much at all."

"The Nightmare Curse is not as new as you might think, Miss Clearwater," said the older mediwitch. "The Order has known about it for quite some time now. Professor Snape gave us the information three years ago."

"Snape!" The word was spat from the mouths of both Harry and Ron with utmost disgust.

"Then you know?" Penelope asked eagerly, her mind obviously staying on the task at hand. "You know how to counter it?"

"There is no counter curse, per se," Madam Pomfrey hedged. "At least, not one that will fully remove the Nightmare."

"Not fully?" Hermione queried, her mind speeding up to its familiar state of overdrive.

"The one person affected by the Curse that the Order has had... access to – well, even with a specialized counter-curse applied, he was plagued intermittently with recurrent waking nightmares, and was unable to fully function within wizarding society."

"And then he died, didn't he?" Harry asked, his eyes having been fixed on the nurse's face during her story. Madam Pomfrey looked uncomfortable.

"He committed suicide," she said shortly, not looking at Ron, and appearing somewhat put out at Harry because he'd brought it up.

"So what happens to Ginny?" Ron asked dully, and Hermione saw Penelope pat him gently on the arm.

"The Order was conducting some rather covert experiments with dream-speaking and Legilimency that looked promising. But it's all extremely theoretical."

"It's all we've got," Harry said stolidly, looking so sorrowfully down at Ginny that Hermione felt her heart ache, even as she mentally berated herself for being so foolish and petty. Madam Pomfrey

nodded slowly, her lips tightly pursed, and began to scan Ginny with her wand. She and Penelope consulted the readout together, with similar grave expressions.

“How is she?” Ron asked, in near perfect synchrony with Harry.

“The Curse is progressive. She was attacked over a month ago?” Nods met this question, and Madam Pomfrey continued. “Did she ever act like she was on the point of waking?” This time, Penelope nodded.

“Professor McGonagall sent for me, when Ginny started waking. I woke her artificially, but – but it didn’t go well. She was sedated fairly quickly after that.”

“That probably helped slow the Curse down, but even that would only be temporary. Has she required higher doses to stay sedated?” Penelope nodded slowly, and the Hogwarts mediwitch looked grim. “Then it’s already spreading. Any other symptoms?”

“She’s blind,” Harry blurted out suddenly, surprising everyone in the room, as well as himself, if his expression was any indication.

“I see,” Madam Pomfrey said simply. “Her body’s done this reflexively, in an attempt to stop the images that replay themselves in her mind. After this much time, the blindness is probably not reversible, but we may still be in time to keep her from ... from disconnecting completely with reality.”

“Penelope said she’d go mad,” Ron ventured desperately, as if pleading with Madam Pomfrey to negate his statement.

“And so she will, Mr. Weasley, if we cannot stop this soon.” She consulted her wand again, and asked, “Does anyone know what nightmare has attached itself to her?” Almost unwittingly, all eyes drifted slowly over to Harry, who gulped a little.

“She’s in the Chamber of Secrets... with – with Tom Riddle, and her family is dead,” he managed to say.

“Harry’s the only one who could get anything lucid out of her at all,” Penelope put in. “If any of her family tried to speak to her, she just screamed out that they were dead. Harry seemed to calm her down ... at least a little bit.”

“Of course,” Madam Pomfrey said. “Harry was the one who saved her from the Chamber initially. It is only logical that he would be somehow – somehow above the nightmare. He got her out of it once; even her subconscious believes that he would succeed again.”

“What do I have to do?” Harry asked.

“There’s a spell I can cast on you, to put you in a kind of dream-like state. You would then need to reach out to Miss Weasley through Legilimency. If you can get to her, make her understand that none of what she sees is real – perhaps get her to leave the Chamber with you – you should break her out of the curse.” Harry looked dubious.

“Is that all?”

“Is that all? I assure you, Harry, this is not going to be a walk in the park. For one thing, this has never been tried before. Legilimency during dreaming is always risky at best, and downright dangerous at worst. There have been those to try something similar, and some have – have not come back.”

“Not come back?” Hermione jumped on this quickly, speaking over the end of Madam Pomfrey’s words, her brow knit in concern. The mediwitch nodded at Ginny pensively.

“He could end up just like her.”

“What if he were to – ” Hermione began, but Ron interrupted.

“I can’t believe you’re even arguing about this. Does it even really matter?” Hermione met his gaze squarely, and he swung around to look at Harry, his eyes appealing for support. “You can’t do Legilimency, Harry. This is pointless.”

Aberforth started visibly, and Madam Pomfrey looked from him to Harry, mystified. Hermione watched Harry's shoulders slump ever so slightly.

"They didn't tell you?" he said, looking at the headmaster's brother. It didn't really sound like a question at all. At Aberforth's sympathetic head shake, Harry opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione rushed ahead before he could label himself a Squib again.

"Voldemort had Harry captured after the battle at Hogwarts. He used some kind of specified dampening field to drain all Harry's magic. He hasn't gotten it back yet." Aberforth sucked in a hissing breath in the middle of Hermione's speech. "We were hoping that you," this was directed at Madam Pomfrey, "might know something to help us here as well."

But the mediwitch was already shaking her head.

"A dampening field keyed to a specific person would be all the more potent. I've not heard of one yet that could be undone. It's the reason that they're banned."

"Well, someone better be sure to give Voldemort his citation," Harry snapped humorlessly, but apologized with almost the next breath.

"It doesn't matter right now anyway," Hermione interjected, shooting a quelling look at her boyfriend. "We were prepared for this contingency. We thought it might be a spell, but Legilimency can't really be that different, can it?" Ron was the quickest to realize exactly what she meant.

"Hermione, are you talking about what you two did to Lupin? You try that on my sister and you'll likely just take the top of her head off. Never mind that you're risking throwing away your magic permanently."

"Harry and I have already discussed this – " Hermione began, trying to speak in an even voice.

“Oh, I’m sure that you and Harry have come to a mutually agreeable solution,” Ron said, with an unpleasant innuendo in his voice. Hermione felt herself bristle.

“Don’t bring the problems you have with me into this, Ron,” Harry warned. “We want to help Ginny. We’ve just been told that I’m probably the only one who can, and that we don’t have much time left. Let me do this.” Something bitter flickered in his eyes. “You used to believe in me...once.”

Ron looked almost ashamed, and he appeared to be on the verge of saying something, but Harry and Hermione had already turned their attention back to Madam Pomfrey and Ginny.

“If you two are determined to do this...” the older woman began tentatively, eying both of them in turn, “then I suggest you at least practice the method on someone else, whose health is in a ... less precarious position. Aberforth and I should be able to coach you through the basics...” Even as she finished her sentence, Harry’s and Hermione’s collective gazes were floating toward Penelope.

“I’ll do it,” Ron’s voice spoke instead, and they both turned warily toward him. “Let me do it. Use my mind.”

“I’m not altogether sure you can spare any of it,” Hermione sniped, but her eyes twinkled a little. Ron and Harry regarded each other gravely for a moment, before Harry nodded once, unsmilingly.

“Close your eyes, Harry,” Madam Pomfrey said, while Aberforth pushed a chair up behind him, so closely that he sat down rather abruptly when it hit him in the back of the knees. Hermione watched him do so, before sitting down as well.

“We’ve not had the privilege of working with this kind of – of piggy-back magic before,” Aberforth said, in a bemused tone. “Hermione, why don’t you go ahead... concentrate on Harry. He’s going to have to have your magic in his possession before he can initiate the contact.”

She reached. She felt a curious aching sensation, a dwindling of her power that she had not noticed on their previous attempt. For a moment, deliciously, she felt all the warmth and complex vitality that was Harry's very essence. Here it is, she thought. Use it how you will. She knew that any loss of her magic, she would consider well worth the sacrifice, even though Harry would not see it the same way at all. She still seemed to retain connection to her magic by a tenuous mental thread; she could feel it pulling taut.

Then suddenly, there was a flash and a loud clatter. Her magic rushed back to her, and she skidded backwards in her chair a few meters. Hermione's eyes snapped open, to see Ron, still sitting in the up-tilted chair, his feet in the air, and his back on the floor.

"Bloody hell, Harry. Are you trying to read my mind or shatter my skull?"

"Sorry," Harry muttered. He looked beseechingly at Madam Pomfrey. "I mastered this over a year ago. Once I have power, shouldn't it – shouldn't I be able to do it correctly?"

"What Hermione is doing is rather like fitting you with a prosthetic limb, a magical hand perhaps, or something like Alistair's eye. You may have been adept at using your power originally, but it will take some adjustment to learn how to use Hermione's as if it were your own. Miss Granger, let's dial it back just a touch. And Harry, think of the light touch of a rapier, not the blow of a battleaxe." Despite the seriousness of the situation, Hermione could not stifle the bubble of laughter that trickled from her lips. Harry eyed her somewhat dourly, with a mock air of betrayal.

They tried again. Ron was only knocked over once more, but it took several attempts before he was able to successfully gain entrance into their best mate's mind. She could tell when he did, because her link to her magic stretched and faded to almost nothing, and it was with a frantic, panicked grasp that she was able to snatch it back from the jaws of oblivion, feeling as if she were clinging desperately to it by her fingernails.

She sat back in her chair, alarm in her eyes, breathing heavily, trying to compose herself. She noticed Aberforth's eyes on her contemplatively, but he said nothing. Harry and Ron had gotten very stiff and awkward, and were quite occupied at studiously avoiding each other's gaze. Hermione wondered absently what Harry had seen that Ron had not wanted him to see.

"Very good, Mr. Potter."

"Brilliant work, Harry." Aberforth's words tumbled over and mingled with those of Madam Pomfrey. Hermione watched with almost maternal pleasure, as Harry flushed under the praise. She could read his emotions flickering tell-tale across his face. He had done something magical, and it did not matter one whit to him that he had had aid. Hermione had seen a look similar to this one on his face when he finished planting the garden, or when he had accepted the Polyjuice potion to use on Neville... the pleasure of contribution, of feeling like part of a whole. Almost anyone, Muggle or wizard, would feel the same, but Harry's disability seemed to magnify all of the innate feelings of worthlessness that the Dursleys had done their level best to instill in him.

They performed the maneuver twice more, before the two older Order members declared themselves satisfied with the progress. Harry was eying her with concern; Hermione could tell that her eyes betrayed her fatigue, and her skin felt clammy.

"Do you want to try with the Wakeful Dream spell induced?" Madam Pomfrey asked. Harry looked uncertain.

"Hermione's tired," he said, even as his eyes floated down to Ginny. Hermione knew why. No one was entirely certain just how much time she had left.

"No," she said quickly. "No, I'm okay. We're not going to hurt Ron, are we?" Her eyes flickered anxiously over to him.

"Doesn't matter if you do," he mumbled. "We've got to do everything possible to help Ginny, while – while she's still able to be helped." Harry and Hermione exchanged worried glances, but then turned and

nodded in tandem to Madam Pomfrey. The mediwitch, in turn, raised her wand, saying softly,

“Quies conscius.”

The change in Harry was subtle, but quite remarkable. He did not slump over and his eyes did not close. Hermione saw the tension in his shoulders and hands relax, and the light, which had been shining out of his eyes like refracted sunlight through green glass, shimmered and dimmed slightly. His breathing deepened, and his blinking ceased. Madam Pomfrey moved in front of him, and spoke to him, but provoked neither visual nor verbal response.

She reached out with her magic, and must have gotten Harry's attention, though his reaction time seemed to be slower and more languid than it had been previously. Hermione thought she understood why Madam Pomfrey had said that combining a dream-state with Legilimency was risky.

“He's made contact, Mr. Weasley?” came the medwitch's soft voice. Hermione kept her eyes closed, concentrating on maintaining a connection with her magic. It seemed to pull further away from her, and she found herself following it.

And then suddenly, she was somewhere else entirely, a large room that seemed to contain nothing but moving pictures or something like television screens, filling every conceivable space.

There was a red-headed boy pulling a Hogwarts trunk toward the Express, while a tiny toddler girl wailed inconsolably.

Arthur Weasley lay in a ward at St. Mungo's, victim of snakebite.

A chocolate cake with eleven sparkling candles was placed on a table, the soft glow gently framing Molly Weasley's face.

A bushy-haired girl with a lofty manner stood in the doorway of a train compartment asking about a toad.

Harry was sorted into Gryffindor.

A graveside service, the details of which were blurry and indistinct. Molly Weasley sobbed into a handkerchief, holding a baby on one hip.

Hermione herself, red-faced and angry, her hair tumbling from its pins, shouting at Ron in the Gryffindor common room.

Hermione and Ron, on the sofa, kissing, in the Gryffindor common room. The quill fluttered from Hermione's fingers, and she...

That particular screen went black, and she could feel embarrassment permeating the very atmosphere around her, suffusing her with its self-conscious heat.

Holy cricket! She thought suddenly. I'm in Ron's memories. How did I get in here? Where's Harry? Where'm I? She reached out for her magic again, for herself, and it seemed to slip away from her like pouring sand. The first tendrils of panic threaded their way through her consciousness.

Harry?

She saw another picture. She was pulling away from Ron; he was grabbing her arm, trying to turn her toward him, pleading. She was stricken by the anguished look on his face.

The screen blanked out again. Hermione tried to find her magic again, her sense of self, but her equilibrium was off. She felt like a diver that did not know which direction was up, or even what "up" was. She felt swamped under a smothering wave of shame and regret and abandonment.

Is that really the way Ron feels about us? She wondered, and wandered further down the corridor, looking with interest at the pictures around her, knowing them now to be Ron's memories. Several of them blanked out, turning into gray squares or disappearing entirely, when her eye fell on them.

Then, a shadowy figure caught her attention. She could not say how far away the figure was, as time and distance seemed to have no

meaning here, and indeed how could it be otherwise? It explained why events that happened many years ago could reappear in one's memory with more clarity than happenings far more recent. She walked – if walking it could be called – with more urgency toward the person. He was turned away from her.

“Ron?” she asked, curiously. “Harry?” He looked up at her instinctively, and she thought she could see the glint of light and shadow on the lenses of his glasses. Or was she being deceived and misled by her own mind? Or Harry's? Or Ron's?

The thousands of screens seemed to swim around her. She was getting confused. She turned back to where she had last seen Harry (was it Harry?), but the shadowy figure had vanished. She began to run (was she moving at all?) in the direction that she thought she had last seen him.

“Harry?” (Who's Harry?) She felt the muscles of her throat and mouth moving, but she heard no sound. Pictures fizzled out of existence, as she ran by, blurring into multi-colored lines. But she was paying them scarcely any mind at all. Panic began to churn itself up into a high-pitched whine.

Hermione? Someone said. Hermione?

Was that her name? Who were they talking to? Who are they?

HERMIONE!

And with blistering clarity, she remembered... turned... Harry! She felt his presence, felt her magic ... moved towards him.

Her eyes snapped open, and she took in a noisy breath of air, as if emerging from under water, after a prolonged amount of time. A ring of concerned faces, with wide, anxious eyes, were ranged round her.

“Are you all right?” came the one voice that she loved most in the world. She managed a shaky nod, trying to process exactly what had happened, trying to identify it, so she could give it a category and a label.

“What – what – ?” she managed to gasp.

“Do you have it?” Harry was almost frenzied, the blazing brilliance of his eyes giving away his anxiety.

“What are you talking about?” she nearly shouted back, goaded into emotional reaction by her confusion and fear.

“Your magic, Hermione. Do you have it?” She felt worry flare in her brown eyes, as she searched for it, raising her wand almost automatically, and saying,

“Alohamora.” Behind the shield of the heavy draperies, everyone could clearly hear the rasp of a window latch unfastening. She saw Harry sag, his eyes sliding closed with almost palpable relief.

“I don’t understand...” she ventured, in a tentative tone that did not sound at all like herself.

“You followed Harry into Ron’s mind,” Madam Pomfrey said gently. Hermione nodded with impatience; she had been able to figure out that much. “I’m not entirely sure that anything like that has ever happened before. You nearly lost yourself.” She shook her head. “I would not have thought that you would have been at as much risk as...”

“What would have happened?” Hermione asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know. Your body would have probably lapsed into a permanent catatonic state. And your mind – your mind would have probably been driven from Ron’s, in a self-defensive gesture, where it would have ceased to exist. If he could not have driven you out, your mental presence would have driven him mad.”

Hermione clamped her lips together, more than upset at the near miss, and wondering how she had failed, what she could do to rectify what had happened. She looked sorrowfully at Harry and Ron.

"I'm sorry," she said, infusing layers of meaning in the simple phrase. Ron shrugged it off.

"You've been bloody well driving me mad for seven years. Hasn't done me any permanent harm yet." Hermione looked at him with a tearful half-smile.

Harry, however, was less lackadaisical, which Hermione had been expecting. Instead of speaking, he cupped her face in both hands, staring into her eyes, touching her skin, as if he wanted to memorize her, as if he were terrified that, even now, she could disappear forever from before their eyes.

One giant sob heaved its way up from her chest, and she stood, all but throwing herself into his arms, as they comfortingly enfolded her in an embrace. She thought she could vaguely hear him murmuring her name into her hair.

"We're going to have to find another way," she thought she heard Ron say.

"There is no other way," a voice said quietly, like the breath of a sigh. She started slightly, when she realized that Harry was the one who had spoken. She moved out of the circle of his arms, and looked at him questioningly. "But I'll not ask you to do that again, Hermione," he finished.

"That means –" Ron said, hoarsely, his eyes fixed on his little sister.

"No!" Hermione said, suddenly and vehemently.

"Hermione, it doesn't work!" Harry argued back. "We can't risk losing you for something that we can't even make work." She saw his eyes dart hastily and guiltily over to Ron, but the red-head conceded his point.

"He's right, Hermione," Ron said in a tired voice.

"How long can Ginny go before – before there's no hope at all?" Hermione asked, turning to Madam Pomfrey.

“It’s hard to say... the number of these cases is quite limited, but I’d say no more than two weeks – and that’s probably at unsafe levels of Sedation potion.”

“Give us one week then,” she said, her eyes moving from Harry to Ron, eliciting very reluctant nods from both. “If we practice in your presence, perhaps with someone anchoring me here, maybe we can do it.” Her eyes drifted down to Ginny on the bed.

Her face was set like flint.

TBC

There we go. I had a dramatic action scene planned, but it would have ended in a cliffhanger....so I decided to stop it here, and put off the action until the next chapter.

Hope you enjoyed. Please review before you go!

Lorien

Chapter Fourteen: Changes

"You've done it then? They're all right?" Fred asked her, as she clambered through the flames out into the War Room. Hermione brushed soot off of her cloak in an almost demure fashion, and nodded, looking grateful but subdued.

"They're fine. Exactly who they said they are. That's everybody in both of the other safehouses." Hermione had been holed up in the War Room for several afternoons, with Fred and McGonagall, and sometimes with an assist from Mr. Weasley or Luna. In an amazingly short span of time, she had come up with a rather brilliant charm that could detect artificially accelerated cell growth – and in turn, cloning – thankfully discerning that there was only one clone present in any of the three safehouses. She had felt almost apologetic performing the charm on Aberforth and Madam Pomfrey, who had brushed off her discomfort, much as Remus had when she had queried him regarding his Patronus. She had only just completed performing the charm on the occupants of the York safehouse, and had returned home.

"Thank Merlin," Fred uttered, from his position hunched over a table arrayed with Potions equipment. As Hermione shed her cloak, she moved beside him, slipping into this new task with the ease of practice.

Six days of the one week that Hermione requested had slowly slipped by. She, Harry, and Ron flooded to the northern safehouse every day to try the mental exercises necessary in the attempt to bring Ginny back. Each afternoon, they returned, exhausted and dejected. Tonks and Fred had occupied themselves with skulking about Cornwall, monitoring the Death Eater activity, which had increased quite a bit in the intervening time.

"He knows – or at least suspects – that we're here," Remus said guardedly over dinner one night. "He just doesn't know where. One sighting of one of us, and he could obliterate the entire region."

"But he won't," Hermione replied confidently. "If he does that, he'll never have any proof that he's beaten Harry. He's got to have – have a –"

“A body,” Harry finished for her laconically. The group gathered around the enlarged table in the War Room fell into an uneasy silence.

With the rest of her time, Hermione was working feverishly in the War Room, first on the Clone Detection Charm, and then on dissecting the components of the potion sent to Neville. She and Fred had managed to isolate the Memory Modification component, as well as the Impression Elixir – a nastily strong version – that was generally a milder sort of liquid equivalent of the Imperius Curse.

It was another such evening in what was becoming a ceaseless series of evenings, as she and Fred bent diligently to their task yet again. Hermione knuckled one eye tiredly, as she waved her wand over the tiny vial, concentrating to extract ingredients from the finished product. Judging from the amount of potion left, there had to be at least three other ingredients, maybe more if there were trace components. She sighed, and tried to modify her expression as Fred saw her.

“How many people did you just administer that charm to? A dozen? You’re not going to be of much use if you’re so tired that you’re walking into furniture,” he said lightly.

“I’m fine,” she said blearily. “It’s pushing Harry into your brother’s mind every day that’s truly tiring.”

“I can imagine,” he snorted, with raised eyebrows.

“Can we even do this?” she asked, waving her hand over the array of potions equipment, including the two vials of precious liquid they had managed to isolate and remove from Neville’s potion. “This has got to be a complicated potion, probably made by a Master – maybe Snape himself. It’s just like the portkey tracer, and I never figured out how they did that either.” She scrubbed both hands over the face, and looking despairingly at Fred. “Voldemort’s out-manuevered us at every turn. How can we – ?”

“Not every turn,” Fred reminded her. “There’s a certain someone in this house that we wouldn’t have, if not for you. I don’t think Voldemort quite reckoned on you.” Hermione flushed a little, and dropped her eyes.

“Some super-genius I turned out to be,” she muttered.

“So, the portkey?” Fred changed the subject. “Did you isolate it down to its components?”

“Yes,” Hermione sighed. “That part wasn’t hard, especially since I was the one who made it. But none of those spells should be traceable over great distances. I – I just don’t know how they managed it.”

“What if it wasn’t the portkey?” Fred asked, making an upward pulling motion with his wand, as if reeling in a fish. “What if it was something on you – or Harry? Ah-ha! Here we go, Hermione,” he cried gaily. “We’ve got something else. It looks like some variant of a Confunding Serum. Bit chaotic though. Poor Neville –no wonder he hears voices shrieking instructions in his head.”

Hermione bit back the obvious reply that the person being restrained upstairs was not Neville.

“If Voldemort was tracing something on me or Harry,” she said, returning to Fred’s earlier comment, “then, why wouldn’t he have found us by now? Why couldn’t he trace us all the way here?”

“You’re the Most Brilliant Witch of your Age,” Fred shrugged. “I’m just postulating. Quick! Get me a vial; I’ve got it.” He had the Confusion Serum hovering neatly above the potion in a purple globule. Hermione Summoned what was essentially a test tube, and Fred dropped it in, where it slithered down the sides to pool in the bottom of the glass container.

“Maybe it’s something we no longer have – but I didn’t leave anything at the quidditch pitch,” Hermione theorized, rambling as she thought out loud. “I don’t understand what they could have possibly been

tracking if ...” She trailed off suddenly, and there was unmitigated horror in her eyes. Fred looked at her in alarm.

“What are you thinking, Hermione?” he asked, evidently straining to keep his voice calm.

“Where’s Harry?” she said hoarsely, speaking in a dazed way, as her eyes drifted toward the War Room door.

“I guess he’s upstairs. There was nobody down here when I got back. What’s going on?”

Hermione didn’t answer him, but fled from the room as if a band of Death Eaters were after her. Her feet pummeled up the stairs in rhythm with her rapidly racing heart, and she nearly fell over Ron coming out of the infirmary. Her other best friend caught her before she hit the ground, and she pushed away from him, almost immediately upon being upright again, intent on careening toward Harry’s room.

But Ron’s hands closed more firmly around her upper arms.

“Hermione, what’s wrong?” His face was pale, and his eyes seemed too large for the rest of his face.

“Where’s Harry – I’ve got to – ” she panted, trying again to disentangle herself from him.

“He’s not here. McGonagall just said so. He and Remus went through the Floo a while ago to the northern safehouse. Wanted to talk with Aberforth about something, I reckon.” This did not decrease Hermione’s agitation, but rather ratcheted it up.

“We’ve got to get him – we’ve got to – ” Ron put his long nose only centimeters away from hers.

“What’s. Going. On?” He enunciated carefully.

“There’s no time to explain, Ron. He’s been tracking him. His magic. The quidditch pitch was just isolated enough for – there were only

remnants – it's been dormant all this time. He sensed it in me at the rally, and nobody realized. And now we've been activating it – drawing him right to us...right to us..."

Ron was peering into her face, obviously trying desperately to understand the frantic racing of her mind and her disjointed speech.

"Drawing who? Voldemort?" Hermione nodded, looking beseechingly into his face. Ron hesitated only an instant more, before tearing down the stairs, Hermione dashing behind him. He was calling as he went,

"Open the Floo, Fred! Open the Floo to the border house." Fred had evidently done so, as soon as he'd heard Ron's voice, for the flames were swirling green in the grate, when they careened through the War Room doorway.

"You'd better tell Tonks that we may have to leave soon," Hermione told Fred hastily, before following Ron into the flames.

Ron tumbled out of the fireplace, with Hermione following so closely behind that she nearly knocked them both down, and they startled the two witches seated in their War Room, hunched over a roll of parchment.

"Where's Harry?" Hermione demanded, impervious to their wide-eyed, bewildered looks.

"I think he's up on the terrace...with Aberforth and Remus..." one of the women offered up hesitantly. Ron and Hermione had gotten familiar enough with the other safehouse in their travels back and forth that they immediately took note of the woman's use of the word "up" rather than "on". Harry was evidently out on the balcony that made up the roof of the covered, ground-level terrace. They were halfway to the door, when Hermione suddenly turned and asked another urgent question, her eyes blazing with some kind of desperate terror.

"What do people see when they look at this house?" The women exchanged uncertain glances. "People not under the Fidelius...what do they see?" Hermione clarified quickly, speaking with intensity.

“They see an old ruin...foundation, chimney, rubble...” The same woman answered, looking at Hermione, as if she were a curious oddity.

There was no further conversation, as Hermione and Ron hurriedly made their way through the winding hallways of the house and up the stairs. When they finally got to the door in a small parlor leading out onto the balcony, Hermione shoved the portal in question open so hard that she rattled the small panes of glass set therein. The three men were lounging on the corner railing, talking intently, but all of them straightened, as they saw Hermione framed in the doorway, with Ron close behind. Harry’s face lit up.

“Hermione, look!” he said, almost like a child on Christmas morning. He either did not notice the somber look on her face, or was ignoring it. She did a double-take when she saw that Harry was holding his wand.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” he pronounced, and his voice sounded young again – young and carefree. A laugh very nearly burbled from his lips as the crumpled dead leaf at his feet lurched unevenly a couple of centimeters from the ground, hovered wobblingly for a moment, and then lowered itself down again. “It took me all afternoon to get this much, but look!” The smile again. Hermione wanted to cry, could barely restrain herself from lowering her face into her hands and sobbing out loud. “Aberforth thinks your magic was – was well, priming the pump, so to speak... for my magic to – to reactivate itself... Evidently, nothing like this has ever been done before, but – well, nobody’s survived Avada Kedavra before either, and I –” He was babbling, and there was brilliant light in his eyes, and Hermione almost couldn’t believe that this was her Harry... and she was going to have to take it all away from him.

He looked up at her, about the same time that she opened her mouth to speak, and finally saw the look on her face. His smile wavered and fell off. Remus spoke first.

“Hermione, what’s happened?” But Harry was quick on the heels of his words.

“Who’s dead? Ginny?” Hermione held her hands up, waving them in front of her hastily to demur what he’d said.

“No, no, nobody’s dead.” Yet, a doomsday voice inside her head portended. She wavered visibly on her feet, and her eyes drifted down to the wand still clenched in his hand. Hermione, look! “Harry...” she managed in a kind of broken sigh. Then, girding herself up, knowing time was short, she added, “Voldemort’s been tracing your magic. It’s how the Death Eaters found us on the pitch at the Burrow.”

She watched the muscles in his neck and jaw work, as he swallowed convulsively.

“I – I didn’t have any magic then. I – he couldn’t have – it was gone...” He stammered, dropping his gaze to the fallen leaf at his feet, looking unable to process exactly what she meant.

“There were no wizards close by – you must have had enough traces of magic in your system to be found. It got harder once your magic was totally spent – plus, your signature would have melted into dozens of others in Diagon Alley. Not to mention, he was sensing you in London, through me, then in Cornwall – you were flashing all over the country. He must have thought the dampening field hadn’t worked at all.”

“But that’s – that’s good...” Harry offered hesitantly. “Good, if he thinks I’m still – still – ” The plaintive phrase how I used to be went unspoken, but was tacitly implied.

“Until you started staying in one place,” Hermione finished ominously. She waited, watched the confusion on his face give way to dawning and grave awareness. Here. All their attempts with Ginny, all of the pushing Hermione’s magic through him – they had all occurred here, save for the impromptu defense against Lupin.

“I’ve – I’ve been – all afternoon, we were – I was – ” He couldn’t finish, and Hermione thought that her heart might burst from his pain. “Is it – is it really so easy to trace a magical signature?”

"You're linked, Harry," Remus spared her the burden of speaking again. "He can sense you in a way that he'd be unable to sense anyone else." Lupin tapped one finger on his own forehead tellingly, looking somewhat weary, as if he wished that he could spare Harry this.

"Then they're coming, aren't they?" Harry said in a vague voice, his eyes tripping over the horizon, as if expecting hordes of invading hosts to come thundering into view. "I've practically sent them an engraved invitation."

"The Fidelius makes it highly unlikely that..." Remus began quickly. Hermione wondered if he disliked the look of total despair on Harry's face as much as she.

"But it's not definite, is it?" Harry interrupted. "Does anyone know what will happen if Voldemort blazes through here, bent on destruction?" Hermione thought bleakly that Harry knew – so did Remus; they had borne witness to it one Halloween night long ago. The two men glanced at each other, their gazes seething with powerless rage and hopeless despair.

"Their Secret Keeper has not been compromised!" Remus stated firmly, pointing out the most important difference between that night and now.

Before anyone could reply, there came a noise that sent fear straight to the core of every person standing out on that terrace...the cracks of multiple Apparitions.

"Sweet Circe!" Aberforth exclaimed under his breath. Harry, in a gesture that nearly terrified Hermione, leaned down on the railing, hunching into the folds of his elbows, his head sinking down to the circle of his arms.

"Harry, get up!" She said fiercely, unable to completely extricate the note of pleading from her voice. "It is not your fault. No one could have foreseen this." She yanked him away from the railing roughly by one elbow, and the group tumbled clumsily and hastily into the house,

as the first dark silhouettes became visible against the lurid glow of the setting sun. The problem with being in a rambling old house was that it was difficult to determine where other people were in relation to oneself. She turned to Remus, as the one who seemed to have the most experience with Fidelius charms. "What do we do?"

"We should get the hell out of here – back home," the werewolf said grimly. "They can't get in. Thad hasn't been out of this house, which means the Fidelius is intact. The people here will be – "

A voice broke into their huddle, a voice made all the more menacing and terrible by its Sonorous-ed volume that said simply,

"Accio Brookhaven!" Hermione's eyes flew up to meet Remus's with profound horror.

"That's – "

"Yes," her former professor finished for her. Thaddeus Brookhaven was a young Auror who had been stationed in Bristol, an acquaintance of Tonks, and some kind of distant relation to Professor Sprout, if Hermione was not mistaken. He was also the Secret Keeper for the northern safehouse. There was a shriek, and then a horrible splintering sound, as if Brookhaven had been Summoned right through a wall of the house.

"What are they – " Harry began hesitantly, his words dying on his lips when he saw Hermione's stricken face. As if in answer to his question, a piercing wail of utter agony reached their ears. Ron clapped his hands to the sides of his head, as the cry seemed to go on and on. Someone must have tried to stop them from an upper window, because there was a sudden scuffle of wandfire, and then a short scream and a thump as the would-be defender was driven from the window by that most final of all curses.

A tremor ran through the frame of the house, and Remus's eyes shot to the ceiling, as if he were inspecting it for structural integrity. Something vaguely pink sparked and shimmered outside, catching the periphery of Hermione's vision. Lupin and Aberforth seemed to realize exactly what was going on at the same time.

"The wards're coming down," Aberforth said.

"You've got through the Floo! Now!" Remus hissed back at him. "You don't have much time. If you see anyone else on your way, take them too."

"What about the others? They've got to be warned," Aberforth asked, as he turned the corner, making for the stairs. Somewhere in the house a window shattered, and there was a cry of surprise, quickly cut off.

"I'll do it," Remus insisted. "I have a medallion, and can get back to our safehouse without the Floo network. They're going to have to shut it down. Go now!" Aberforth nodded in understanding, and slunk around the corner out of sight, wand at the ready, keeping to the shadow of the walls.

Remus turned and his steady gaze met those of the Trio head on.

"Take Harry and go," he said, averting his eyes from his friend's son, to look mostly at Hermione. "His safety is of utmost importance."

"I can – " Harry began, almost tentatively raising his wand.

"Wingardium Leviosa is not going to stop Death Eaters," Remus said bluntly, almost wincing as he did so. Hermione saw Harry's pale face flush with the renewed shame of being a catalyst for trouble and a burden. "Get out of here. Tell them to shut down the Floo as quickly as possible."

Somewhere, not too far – perhaps the kitchen – there was a shriek of surprise and a muffled utterance of Avada Kedavra. The Fidelius charm had crumbled, ripped – Hermione supposed – from Thaddeus Brookhaven's no longer functioning mind. She tried to feel grief, but couldn't. The Trio exchanged a long look. Hermione's face was calm, though she reckoned that her eyes were a little more honest. Ron had a mixture of fear and resignation dancing in his gaze, though there was a Gryffindor glint there that made Hermione think that he didn't want to go down without a fight. Harry's face was tight and

pinched and white with guilt. I led him here; I drew him here; I'm leaving other people in danger to save my precious hide. These thoughts were as apparent to Hermione as if he'd shouted them at her.

"I'll stay," Ron said quickly, the two words tripping over each other as they left his lips. "Two medallions mean more people can get out." His eyes slid sideways over his two best friends. "Hermione can take care of Harry." The Trio shared a long, meaningful look, seemingly overflowing with memories, apologies, and promises.

"We've got to get out of here," Hermione said quietly, and threaded her arm tightly through Harry's, thinking of Fred's whimsical face with all of her might.

They disappeared.

They met a shaken Aberforth with the two other women from his house in the War Room. Most of the rest of the Order seemed to be clustered around him in a worried knot. Tonks had one hand on a hip and was chewing the knuckle of another. Her eyes were flickering worriedly toward the fireplace, which crackled serenely in variant shades of orange and yellow.

When they appeared next to Fred, Tonks glanced at Harry quickly.

"Was it him?" Her words were clipped and concise. Harry nodded once, a downward jerk of his chin.

The flames swirled green, and Fred, Aberforth, and Tonks all had their wands at the ready, before the person was ejected from the grate. Aberforth sighed with relief, when it was Poppy Pomfrey who came through.

"Where is Remus?" Tonks said in an agonized tone. "Why did he stay? He's the bloody Secret Keeper!" Hermione knew that the status of Remus as the Secret Keeper was not truly the Auror's main concern.

"He stayed because it doesn't matter now," Aberforth told her quietly, laying one gnarled hand on her shoulder with a gentleness that

forcibly reminded Hermione of their Headmaster. “The Fidelius doesn’t apply to that fireplace link. If they get through the Floo, they’re in – Fidelius or no Fidelius. When ours went down, it put the whole network at risk.”

“Professor Lupin can get back. Ron – Ron’s with him.” Hermione offered, seeing Tonks’ agony. “They’ve got their medallions.”

“Those other people don’t,” Aberforth said, still quiet, his eyes shining with remembered horrors. Hermione felt, rather than saw, Harry nearly wilt next to her. When they shut down that Floo, they were effectively condemning everyone in that house to death. She threaded her fingers through his, watching Tonks’ eyes slide shut in pain.

“I know,” the Auror said softly. “We’re the last of the Order, Aberforth. Harry’s safety is paramount. You know what Albus would’ve wanted. We’ve no choice.” The resigned look on Aberforth’s weathered face told Hermione that he’d known all this already. She felt Harry make a restless movement beside her, as if he’d protest Tonks’ decision, but he said nothing. The mantle of guilt on his shoulders filled the room with an oppressive and nearly tangible pall. She looked at the two women, who’d come through the Floo with Aberforth. “You’re civilians?” They exchanged worried, frightened glances, and nodded.

“We should send them through the Floo to the safehouse in York,” Harry spoke up suddenly, surprising the room with the authority that had crept into his voice. “Then, shut it down.” Harry seemed to so rarely take up a position of leadership that it rather startled everyone in the room, despite the seriousness of the situation. Hermione vaguely wondered if Ron was okay.

At Tonks’ nod of agreement, Fred began to fiddle with something on the fireplace mantle, then threw a handful of powder into the flames, shouting,

“York.” He gestured toward the two women with a serious face. “Go on then. After you get through, tell them to disconnect it,” he said. With one backwards look of uncertainty, they plunged into the green flames and disappeared. The color in the fire swirled and faded, as

the flames turned back to their original brilliant color. Everyone in the room seemed to breathe, as if they'd simultaneously remembered that they hadn't in a while.

The embers in the grate made a chuffing noise, and the flames glowed emerald again. The hands of the Order went for their wands, as if belonging to one single-minded creature.

"Shut it down. Now!" Harry bit out, as if physically forcing the words from his throat.

"But what if – " Hermione blurted, almost involuntarily, but stopped, as Harry fixed her with a gaze that was almost equal parts blazing fury and wretched despair.

Fred waved his wand at a blue and white china vase sitting perkily atop the mantle, holding an innocuous bouquet of yellow silk flowers. It slid from one side of the mantle to the other, and the flames died with a rapidity that was unnerving. Almost immediately, they were left staring at a still smoking grate, and a pile of embers slowly turning from orange to gray.

"Make sure they won't be able to trace the Floo conduit," Harry said quietly, and turned on his heel to leave the room. Fred turned to the fireplace, and began muttering a rather complicated incantation. Hermione heard the back door creak slightly, and followed him out, hearing Tonks say,

"We're going to have to pack up and get out of here. If Remus – " she could not finish the sentence.

"Harry," was the only word that Hermione uttered, as she sat down on the back steps next to him, and laid her head on his shoulder. She looked up at the blurry, too-close profile of his beloved face, which was set like flint, his gaze going out over the open water.

"Those people – they – " he said haltingly.

“They’re wizards too, you know,” she offered up hopefully. “Very capable. And I know there were some escape methods built in, like our trapdoor in the cellar. It could be okay.”

“What are we going to do now?” he asked, and she hesitated, unsure whether or not the question was rhetorical, until he tore his stare from the horizon and looked at her expectantly.

“We’ll find a new place. We may have to – ” Harry shook his head.

“I can’t go with you.” She lifted her head off his shoulder to look at him in bewildered hurt.

“Harry, don’t be ridiculous. You have – ”

“If he’s tracking my magic, Hermione, what will he be able to do once it’s come back? It’s already coming back. He’ll have a homing device right to me, right to whomever I’m with. I can’t stay with the Order.”

“Harry, you – ” she stopped suddenly, as she realized the truth in his words. “Oh God...”

“I’d go on now... without fussing everyone, but I don’t – ” He smiled then, and his smile was bitter and ironic. “I don’t think I can Apparate myself anywhere yet.”

“I’m going with you,” Hermione said, with a quiet determination.

“The hell you are,” Harry shot back, instantly rejecting any notion that would put her in danger. She glared at him.

“And when the Death Eaters find you again? What are you going to do? Levitate them to death?” Harry flinched a little, but Hermione did not modify her expression. “Look, there may be something we can work out ... a twist on a Confunding or Masking charm. Maybe I can figure out a way to hide your magical signature from Voldemort. It’ll just take time. But you have to let me come with you.”

“Hermione, I – ” he began in a feeble protest, when the back door swung open to reveal Nymphadora Tonks.

"We could use your wand in here, Hermione," the Auror said shortly, her words stern, but her eyes soft, flitting over the two of them on the steps.

They followed Tonks back into the house, which was bustling with activity, as things were dismantled, shrunk, and sent soaring across rooms into various trunks or knapsacks. Fred was sending all their potions paraphernalia into a specially cushioned box with a hinged lid, which he then sealed shut with a flourish of his wand.

"Where are we going to go?" Aberforth asked Tonks seriously, his eyes seeming to flicker over to Harry involuntarily. Tonks shrugged, looking worried and uncertain.

"I don't know. There's not time to ward anything properly, but we'd probably have to move again anyway, if..."

"My family has a place near Dover," Madam Pomfrey said. "I haven't been out there since my mother died, but it's somewhere we could go quickly, catch our breath, suss out what to do next..."

"I think that could work," Hermione spoke up, and Tonks seemed to agree. Madam Pomfrey grabbed a quill, and began to scratch the coordinates onto a scrap piece of parchment. "We should – " she began, but promptly forgot what she was going to say, when Remus and Ron suddenly appeared back in the War Room.

"Oh, Remus, thank Merlin," Tonks exclaimed. "What – is everyone – ?"

"We got most of them safely to York," Remus said, looking especially haggard. Ron was cradling his left wrist in his right hand. "The ones that weren't already – " he stopped abruptly. "We made it to the cellar, and got out. We think the Death Eaters were about to burn the place to the ground... once they found out the Floo had been disabled. Good work, by the way," he said this to Fred, who, somber-faced, tipped a brim of an imaginary cap at him in response.

“McGonagall and Penelope have nearly got the infirmary squared away,” Tonks said. “Poppy’s taking us to her family’s home in Dover. We should probably go ahead and go.”

Hermione picked up a random pack from where they were leaning against the wall of the War Room. She felt tense and edgy... even now, Voldemort was searching, reaching out with all his power, looking for Harry, sifting through all the magical signatures, slowly homing in on the one that was most familiar to him. Had Neville betrayed the identities of all of the Secret Keepers? Her ears pricked, as if any moment she would hear a terrible command,

“Accio Lupin.”

She could not relax, even after she had committed Madam Pomfrey’s coordinates to memory, and Side-Alonged Harry to Dover.

“There, now,” Poppy Pomfrey exclaimed, as she pulled several dust-covers off of large pieces of furniture, sending up a cloud of dust that made Ron and Harry cough. Remus, Tonks, and Aberforth were putting up some hasty wards, but having heard Hermione’s explanation for the attack on the safehouse, everyone knew that they could not stay long.

In the initial commotion, Ron sidled up to Hermione, having secreted Neville safely in a sealed, soundproofed closet. Luna was leaning up against the closet door, almost lazily, her fingers loosely curled around her wand.

“I’m going with you,” Ron said, in a near whisper.

“Going where? What are you talking about?” Hermione said, almost irritably.

“Come off it, Hermione. I’ve known you for how long now? You and Harry are planning on leaving, I can tell.”

“Ron, we have to,” she said, deciding to dispense with pretense. “They’re just going to follow Harry everywhere. Nowhere is safe... unless I can come up with something.”

"I know you have to. And you're not leaving me behind. I can help."

"Harry's trying to put as few people in danger as possible," she protested.

"I'm not just people," Ron said. "I'm his best mate – and yours – or at least, I thought I was."

"Of course you are, Ron. But what about Ginny and Fred and your dad? Are you just going to leave them?"

"Leave who where?" Remus said suddenly, having evidently returned from erecting wards. His voice was too disarming, and Hermione wondered how much of the conversation he'd heard.

Harry had noticed the interplay, and set down the trunk that he had just picked up.

"I have to go, Remus," he said simply. "If Voldemort is tracing my magic, and my magic is starting to come back, then I can't stay here. I'll only put everyone I'm around in danger."

Lupin's face creased, but he did not argue with Harry. It was almost, Hermione observed, as if the werewolf had been expecting something of the sort.

"Now, Harry..." Mr. Weasley began, almost comically hesitant and stammering slightly, "I know that this last hour or so has been ... somewhat disconcerting, but ... there's no need to go off half-cocked, and ..." He floundered to a stop, but then said, "You know the Order will always back you."

"I know, sir," Harry said sincerely. "It won't be permanent. It'll only be until – until –"

"Until when, Harry?" Tonks asked, trying to sound pleasant, even though she clearly looked ambivalent about Harry's plan of action.

"Until Hermione comes up with a charm that masks my magic enough for me to keep training and build my strength back," he said matter-

of-factly. “Then we can find you lot again, and storm Hogwarts, get rid of the Primes, and defeat Voldemort for good.”

“How do you even know where the Primes are?” Tonks asked, sounding stubborn and challenging.

“Where else would they be?” Harry replied. “It’s the best place in Britain if you want to hide something. It’s obvious why Voldemort hit the Ministry and Diagon Alley. He needed those places strategically, to cement his victory. Why would he have attacked Hogsmeade? Because he didn’t want a center of Wizarding population so near Hogwarts. Why did he want Hogwarts? Professor Dumbledore was dead. I’d graduated. The school year had ended. There was no logical reason for him to take Hogwarts unless he wanted to protect something.”

Hermione stood next to Harry, feeling quietly proud. He hadn’t been succumbing to self-pity, his magical ability – or lack thereof – notwithstanding. As dubious as the distinction was, Harry seemed to have a keen insight into the mind of the wizard currently ruling England. And perhaps her task was to see that he stayed alive long enough to put that knowledge to good use.

“We’ve done this before,” Ron blurted suddenly. “We were on our own last summer hunting horcruxes, and we did just fine. Got rid of all of them. We even know some good places to hide.”

All eyes in the room snapped suddenly to Ron, and he flushed under the scrutiny, ducking his head. His father stared at him, almost wonderingly, and then approached him, reaching out to cup his hands around the junction of Ron’s neck and shoulders. He looked into his youngest son’s eyes for a long moment, and then said,

“You’ll do your mother proud, son.” It was not a question or the solicitation of a promise; it was an assertion, and Hermione thought she saw Ron’s eyes take on a sheen in the dim light of the dusty room.

“I don’t – I don’t think,” Harry began, clearing his throat awkwardly, as though loath to interrupt such a moment, “I don’t think that you should

know where we are, or that we should know where you are. We have the medallions, and those should get us to each other, if it becomes necessary.”

The members of the Order stood around in the shrouded room, some furniture still gloomily swathed in heavy fabric. Dust motes swirled in the light streaming from the one window that had had the draperies pulled aside. The only sound was bustling movement from Penelope, as she and Professor McGonagall worked to make Ginny as comfortable as possible.

Hermione watched as Harry’s eyes drifted slowly, almost unwillingly, to the small divan where the girl he had once loved – thought he loved? – lay prone. Uncertainty flickered in his eyes before they grew determined, and she wondered what sort of decision he had just reached.

As if reading her mind, he looked suddenly at her, reaching one hand out for hers.

“We’re going to do it. Now. Before we leave,” he said, as she took his hand, looking at him without comprehension.

“Do what, Harry?”

“Bring Ginny out of it. Before we go.” He looked around at the other Order members with apology in his eyes. “You won’t be able to stay here. I’m sure a magical output of that magnitude will bring Voldemort at top speed.”

“Harry, we haven’t even – we still don’t know if it will work,” Hermione protested.

“It’s got to work. You asked for a week, and it’s been six days. What other choice is there?” She pondered the hard, determined look in his eyes, and acquiesced with a quiet,

“Alright.” She cast a brief glance at both Ron and Mr. Weasley, who seemed to have come to terms with the fact that this tenuous plan was Ginny’s only hope. As she and Harry moved to the side of the

divan where Ginny lay, she saw Mr. Weasley put one hand on Ron's shoulder, and Fred thread his way from the far side of the room to stand next to the remainder of his family.

"Are you ready?" Harry asked her softly, his thumb softly stroking the backs of her fingers, so lightly that it was barely a touch, but so intently that it sent prickles all the way up her arm. She nodded, and closed her eyes.

She reached out with her magic, pushing it out ahead of her, as if thrusting it away from herself. But she did not relinquish her hold on it entirely, instead following it toward Harry's mind, careful to keep a toehold in her own mind, so as to not lose herself, as she had so nearly done last time.

She felt Harry's presence, felt him take control of her magic, felt him plunge toward Ginny's mind, as they had so often approached Ron's. Again she followed, constituting his support, funneling her magic toward him with as much strength as she could muster, while simultaneously trying to call up memories of home, of her parents, of her grandmother, anything to keep her identity from slipping away from her.

She sucked in a deep breath, as entry into Ginny's mind shocked her. It was not like Ron's mind, warm and alive and – if her presence was detected – usually embarrassed. It was cold and limp, unmoving... like a – like a corpse, she realized suddenly. She hoped it was not too late.

She could still feel the ambient warmth of Harry's presence, glowing deliciously like firelight, and reached for him, feeling her power thrumming through her like electric current.

"Ginny?" Harry's voice echoed thinly, as if Hermione were hearing him over a great distance. "Ginny? Are you there? It's Harry."

There was a rushing sound, as if something were approaching from very far away, and Hermione felt as if the ground shifted under her feet – which was ridiculous because there technically was no ground under her feet right now anyway.

The same picture-windows that she had seen in Ron's mind began to pop up in the grayish misty swirling of Ginny's mind. Hermione felt hope spring up within her; Ginny's mind was responding to their presence. Maybe they weren't too late after all.

And then her perspective shifted wildly, as if the entire world were tilting around her, as if she were falling. A soundless scream tore from her throat, even though she knew she was not falling anywhere. My mother's name is Helen Granger. My father's name is...

The end of the sentence died unborn in her mind, as the vistas of Ginny's mind were replaced with one she knew all too well, even though she had never seen it herself. But Ginny had. Harry had.

The Chamber of Secrets.

Hermione felt cold tendrils prick down the back of her neck and spine, when she saw a handsome young man, in black Hogwarts school robes, standing at the far end of the chamber, near the statue of Salazar Slytherin. She was being pulled forward now, powerless to stop it, and knew that Ginny's nightmare was in motion. There was nothing either she or Harry could do to stop it from replaying itself.

Bodies were everywhere, and Hermione felt her gorge rise, even knowing that this depiction of events in the Chamber had not actually happened. Ginny was standing – Ginny as Hermione had last seen her, at nearly seventeen, not Ginny at eleven – opposite Tom, looking frazzled and dirty and wet, her hunched posture one of cowed submission. Hermione tried not to look at the crumpled forms of various Weasleys – even in the nightmare, the red hair stood out in brilliant contrast to the gray stone.

My mother's name is Helen Granger.

Tom Riddle reached one clawed hand toward Ginny, and even though no contact was made, Ginny flinched and screamed shrilly, as if hit by a Cruciatus curse.

“Mum? Daddy? Bill? Make it stop, somebody make it stop,” Ginny keened, as she sank to her knees, folding up over her legs like a discarded doll. Hermione saw her fingers, digging into the skin of her forehead, clenched over her eyes – her eyes that had left off the ability to see, in an desperate attempt to stop the horror.

“Ginny?” came a familiar voice that was not Harry’s. Hermione turned toward the source of the sound in wonder. It was one of the twins.

“George?” Ginny asked hopefully. He was less than halfway down the length of the chamber, when Tom Riddle stretched out his hand again, closing it into a fist, and rotating his wrist sharply. George stopped suddenly, as if physically restrained, and made a gurgling sound. A thin line of blood appeared around his neck, as he was garroted by an unseen hand. Ginny made a movement, as if she would run toward him, but she was prevented from moving by an invisible barrier.

George reached one hand for her, and tried to say her name. His lips moved, but only blood frothed from his lips. Ginny wailed helplessly, and Tom Riddle laughed. Hermione was starting to feel panicky. Where was Harry? Where was she channeling her magic?

My mother’s name is Helen Granger.

“Leave her alone, Tom,” came a voice that she knew all too well. A tremendous surge of joy welled up in her heart, and she turned to see Harry striding down the wide aisle to the top of the chamber. He seemed taller than she remembered, and broader through the shoulders. A cloak was fastened at his neck with the Gryffindor crest, and whipped behind him in an unseen, unfelt breeze that also ruffled his tousled dark hair. Hermione was bewildered at the changes, until she realized that she was seeing him as Ginny had seen him at age eleven, as a conquering hero, as her noble rescuer, as her unrequited love. She felt a paradoxical pang of sympathy for the girl, trying to imagine how she would feel if Harry did not love her back.

“Harry!” Ginny gasped, in a kind of half-hiccup, half-sob. Hermione wondered whether or not it was completely ridiculous to be jealous of someone else’s nightmare. She felt her control slipping.

My mother's name is Helen Granger. My birthday is September 19th.

Tom Riddle's features seemed to twist and sharpen, slowly morphing into the more familiar, less human visage of Lord Voldemort. Ginny, by contrast, looked calmer, more confident, and Hermione couldn't fault her. After all, hadn't Harry fought and won this battle already?

My mother's name...she groped for it frantically for a moment, momentary panic swelling in her breast. My mother...

"Hermione?" She jerked her chin up in surprise. Harry was looking over his shoulder at her. "Go. I've got it. I can do it."

Are you sure? Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Even so, Harry must have heard her, for she felt his reply throb through her consciousness, though he did not speak.

I'm sure. I love you.

She let go, and felt herself hurtling backwards. The chamber faded into a gray mist, and her mind was streaming back into her body like a rubber band that has been pulled taut and released.

She opened her eyes.

Harry's fingers were limp in her hand. His head was still bent, his eyes closed. His other hand was clasping Ginny's, and she moved restlessly on the divan.

"Hermione?" Ron hissed, nudging her lightly in the side. "Are you okay?" She nodded, without looking at him, her eyes fixed on Harry.

"He said he had it. I think he's going to do it." Ginny's face grew pale, and her lips twitched, as she mumbled something inarticulate. Harry disentangled his hand from Hermione's, and renewed his hold on Ginny's hand with both of his.

Nobody from the Order moved – Hermione wasn't sure that any of them were even breathing. It seemed like half a lifetime had passed,

but she could tell from the way the light streamed in the one open window that only a few minutes had gone by since they had first arrived there.

Ginny cried out, and tried to wrest her hand from Harry's, but he held fast. His face had grown tense with concentration, and Hermione saw a fine sheen of sweat break out on his forehead. She desperately wanted to retrieve his hand, but didn't know what sort of effect it would have on the entire procedure. An involuntary, indistinguishable cry escaped his slightly parted lips. His body went rigid.

His eyes flew open, and he gasped out an, "Oh my God," as he drew in a shaky breath. Almost simultaneously, Ginny sat up on the divan, crying out,

"Mum? Dad?"

"Ginny?" Mr. Weasley voiced tentatively, after Harry had nodded at him to respond.

"Daddy?" she asked, reaching one hand for him, in the direction from which he had spoken. "Was I hurt at Hogwarts? What's wrong with my eyes? Where's Mum?" Penelope and Madam Pomfrey hovered discreetly nearby, running scans with their wands, while Hermione and Ron exchanged misty looks. Harry wavered on his feet and nearly fell, caught just in time by his two best friends, who helped him to a recently uncovered chair.

"Is she – is she all right?" Harry asked, breathily, bending over his knees, as one who is trying to ward off nausea.

Hermione's gaze flickered over to Ginny, who was saying softly, in an almost broken voice,

"I – I remember. I – she pushed me out of the way, and – something hit us both." She blinked rapidly as tears welled up, and crumpled up into her father's embrace. "Merlin, is it all over? We lost?" Hermione looked down at Harry, only to see that he was watching Ginny as well.

"We should go," he said suddenly, rising quickly to his feet. Hermione did not fail to notice the way he swayed slightly, his hand going subtly down to the arm of the chair to steady himself.

"Harry, maybe you should take a minute," Ron said, shooting a look of alarm at Hermione. Harry's face had gone positively gray.

"We don't know how much time we have, Ron. All I know is that nobody should be here when Voldemort comes to call," Harry tried to snap at his best mate, but couldn't achieve the energy required to pull it off. Hermione's brow knit with concern, and she reached out to stroke Harry's upper arm softly.

"Harry, sit down. It will take Voldemort a few hours to trace us. We've got a little bit of time. In fact, why don't you take a kip, while Ron and I figure out where exactly we're going to go?" Harry looked as if he'd like to argue with her, but couldn't muster up the wherewithal to do so. When he reached up to brush the sweat-dampened hair back from his forehead, his hand was trembling.

Hermione tried not to let her alarm show. This had obviously taken more out of him than he wished to reveal. Had they come this far only to trigger a relapse back to the weak, battered Harry that had just escaped Voldemort's clutches?

Watching long enough to ascertain that Harry's lids had begun to droop, even as he fought to keep them open, Hermione returned to the group of people clustered around Ginny.

"How is she?" she whispered to McGonagall, as Penelope gave Ginny instructions regarding a very light sleeping draught being administered.

"It's not like sedation," the young mediwitch said. "It'll be a natural sleep. Just for a few hours."

"No nightmares?" Ginny asked, a little fearfully. Hermione couldn't really blame her.

“No nightmares,” Penelope said soothingly, and Ginny seemed to relax. Her father had pulled up a chair, and was holding her small hand in between his two bigger ones.

“Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?” Ginny asked Mr. Weasley in a little-girl voice that was nearly slurred with fatigue. Hermione felt a lump grow in her throat, as she looked from Ginny to Harry, now sleeping propped in a chair. Ron was maneuvering a small end table over to Harry’s feet, lifting his legs up onto its dusty surface.

“Miss Clearwater doesn’t know if the blindness can be fixed at this point,” Professor McGonagall replied to Hermione, sotto voce. “She should be physically fine, otherwise. Whether or not she can handle the emotional and mental stress of her reality, as well as the memories of her nightmares, remains to be seen.”

Hermione knew the instant Harry awakened, because he careened out of his chair, seemingly all arms and legs, his face frantic, though still somewhat blurred with sleep.

“What time is it?” he said, with much more panic than such a question would normally warrant. His eyes went to the window, where the low light slanting through was probably doing nothing to allay his fears.

“It’s almost seven,” Hermione said calmly, and Harry’s gaze jerked abruptly over to meet hers. “We’re ready to go when you are.”

“And the Order? Where are they going?” Hermione pressed her lips together tightly, blinking back errant tears.

“We’ve decided that you were right – it’s best that we not know,” she said simply. Clearly, logically, it was a wise decision. But, Merlin, it hurts, she thought to herself.

“We’re cutting ourselves off from the other safehouses,” Remus spoke up then, moving from where he’d been standing in one of the more shadowy corners of the room. “We’re what’s left of the Order; we’re your back-up, Harry. That’s just too dangerous for civilians at this point. The medallions have been charmed for communication, and all you have to do is contact us; we’ll be there instantly.”

"In the meantime," Tonks put in, almost hesitantly. "We'll be looking for ways to infiltrate Hogwarts. There can be no action against Voldemort until that army has been destroyed."

"We'll be back," Harry said seriously, trying to infuse his voice with confidence. "As soon as Hermione's gotten a charm that will camouflage my magic, so that I can use it safely, we'll be back to help." He looked sideways at Hermione with a fond little smile. "Knowing her, I don't think it will take long." She flushed a bit, and looked down at her shoes.

Ron was sitting on the edge of the divan with Ginny, talking with Fred and his father. The four red heads were clustered close together, looking brilliant in the shrouded room, and reminding Hermione uncomfortably of the rendering of Ginny's nightmare. He leaned over and kissed Ginny gently on the forehead, and Mr. Weasley and Fred each clapped him on a shoulder, in a very man-to-man way, masking any emotion.

Hermione moved to hug Tonks, McGonagall, Luna, Penelope, Madam Pomfrey, and Fleur in turn. The circuit around the room deposited her near Ginny's head, and she found herself engulfed in an enthusiastic embrace by Fred Weasley. Over his shoulder, she could see Remus hugging Harry tightly, the tension in their arms and shoulders betraying how they felt about leaving each other. Hermione knew that Remus Lupin was the closest thing to a father that Harry had left, having stepped into the place left vacant by James Potter and Sirius Black.

At length, Harry had drifted over to the Weasleys, and Hermione tried to move away to where Ron was speaking quietly with Luna, unable to keep one eye from monitoring the proceedings by the divan.

"Ginny," Harry said, his voice low and uncertain.

"Harry!" She reached out her hand, and he clasped it. Unlike his, her voice sounded glad. "I wanted to... to thank you for what you did."

"You're my friend, Ginny – and a good one. You would have done the same for me," Harry replied, watching her with compassion and a little regret. His use of the word 'friend' had not been lost on Ginny, any more than it had on Hermione, as the latter saw a flash of hurt glint in Ginny's unseeing eyes.

"And you're – you're with Hermione now?" The words were phrased carefully, enunciated to prevent the slightest bit of emotional outburst. Her chin wobbled only a little.

"Yes," Harry remarked quietly. "Did Ron tell you?"

"Not in so many words," Ginny replied. "But I could hear it in your voice. The way you said her name – it was softer... almost reverent." Her lips twisted upward in a mirthless smile. "They say that you compensate with your other senses, when one sense is lost. I'm doing well, aren't I?"

"Ginny – " he began, but stopped almost as quickly, seemingly at a total loss. "I never wanted to hurt you." Hermione saw him flinch at the inanity of the words.

"I'm not going to lie and say it doesn't hurt, Harry," Ginny told him, looking in his direction with wet eyes. "But we've got bigger things to be hurting over right now, don't we? And you've more important things to accomplish." She reached up and brushed a few recalcitrant strands of hair from his forehead, looking for all the world like she could see him clearly. "Come back after you've defeated Voldemort, and I'll kick you in the nads like you deserve." Her face was impish, even while her eyes were shiny with tears. An involuntary laugh escaped Harry's lips, and Hermione felt a twinge of envy over the easy way that she had always been able to make him laugh.

"If I make it out of all this, I'll let you," he promised in a light-hearted tone, and leaned in to kiss her temple. "Take care of yourself, Ginny."

"Don't worry about me, Harry. Be safe," Ginny replied, biting her lips together in an effort to keep her tears from gaining control. Harry turned toward Hermione and Ron, and Hermione tried to act like she hadn't been eavesdropping on his conversation with Ginny.

“Are you ready?” he asked. In answer, Hermione went over to a wall where three packs were propped, picked them up, handed one each to Harry and Ron, and shouldered the third. “Where are we going?” He looked surprised, when Hermione slanted a slightly nervous look over to Ron.

“It’s all over magical residue,” she said. “And not too far from two other villages that are in the same state. We’re hoping that the – the fallout will make it harder for Voldemort to find us. If you don’t use your magic at all, your low levels of output should be hidden by the interference... hopefully, long enough for us to come up with something more permanent – and portable – to cover your magic.” Harry was looking at her, mystified, obviously curious as to why she seemed so nervous about their choice.

“It’s one of the villages Voldemort destroyed, isn’t it? Are you sure there won’t be a contingent of Death Eaters there?” he asked.

“I don’t see why,” she answered. “There’s nothing left to guard. But I think we can – we can stay where we stayed last time – last summer.” She watched awareness flicker over his face, and knew that he was thinking of restless, uneasy nights in a fusty smelling cellar beneath the ruins of a house that had been all but destroyed 17 years ago. He swallowed once and looked at her, as he said grimly,

“Godric’s Hollow.”

TBC

There we go. I’ve been pulling my hair out with this chapter. Blasted wizards and their blasted Fidelius charms make it very difficult for a safehouse to be attacked. My action scene turned out to be less of one, I thought, because the Order wasn’t going to be trapped anywhere, as long as they had their medallions. So, I apologize if it wasn’t as exciting as I meant for it to be. Curse my own inventiveness:P

Please leave a review on your way out. Hope you enjoyed!

Lorien

Chapter Fifteen: Exile

They arrived in Godric's Hollow with hardly a sound. Hermione and Ron, having jointly Side-Alonged Harry, now stood flanking him closely, wands drawn. Harry's wand was in Hermione's pocket, as further removal from temptation, while the owner of said wand looked decidedly disgruntled. Hermione knew that he was irritated that he needed protection, that he couldn't contribute to their defense, and that they were putting their lives at risk for him.

Like you wouldn't do the same – and more – for us, Hermione thought fondly, glancing at Harry for a moment before turning her attentions to the town.

Nothing stirred. It seemed that nothing even drew breath, and Hermione knew that she was surely holding hers. Godric's Hollow was almost unrecognizable as having ever been any sort of recent civilization at all. The splintered wood of support beams pointed at the darkening sky like accusing fingers. Glassless windows gaped like eye sockets in half-toppled walls. Debris littered the streets, every day objects lying where they had been discarded in haste, or dropped upon their carrier's demise. Papers and trash fluttered in light breeze. Tendrils of mist swirled around the knees of the Trio, adding an otherworldly aura to an already eerie scene. A faint scene wafted on the air – an unpleasant odor reminiscent of gunpowder and sulfur...and something else that Hermione couldn't quite put her finger on.

"Bloody hell," she heard Ron whisper, barely even moving his lips. She held up a cautionary finger in front of her mouth for silence, listening intently. There was nothing. Tonks' hasty monitoring charm had revealed no recent magical activity in the town, though the residue lingering from the village's destruction made the charm's results dodgy at best. Either the Death Eaters were no longer watching the Hollow, or the Trio's presence was so far undetected.

Hermione jerked her head in the direction of the house – Harry's house, she supplied mentally, though she had always had difficulty labeling it as such. They began walking, keeping to the shadows, choosing their steps carefully, unwilling to even light their wand-tips to

more securely traverse the uncertain ground. Harry was in the middle, and Ron brought up rear guard, ever so often pivoting watchfully in a complete circle.

On one such circuit, something crunched noisily under his feet, startling all three of them. Upon jumping rather violently, Hermione felt the toe of her shoe connect with something soft, but solid. There was a soft cry, heard clearly in the unnatural silence, and a treble voice called out plaintively,

“Mama....” They all froze, and the frantic glance Hermione hurled over her shoulder ascertained that Harry’s face was ashen in the descending darkness. Her eyes roved wildly, searching for this child that had somehow survived the massacre. She risked lighting her wand.

The low light danced off the shattered lenses of the glasses that Ron had stepped on. Then she saw it, and didn’t know whether to be relieved or dejected. Her foot had hit a Muggle doll, kicking it a short distance, and causing it to subsequently protest in its one word vocabulary.

“It’s a doll – just – just a doll,” she gasped, almost breathlessly, without turning back to her best friends. A semi-hysterical laugh trembled on her lips. She edged forward to retrieve it, and when she bent down and picked up the crumpled object, the blue glow of her wand glinted off of something pale, nearly concealed beneath a dense combination of debris and shrubbery, further hidden by the shadows of the stone remnants of a chimney.

There was a tiny, outstretched hand, arm outflung from its hiding place, fingers bloated and slightly flexed. Someone was moaning slightly, almost in protest, and Hermione realized with some surprise that it was she. The doll fell from her lifeless fingers, and wailed again when it hit the ground.

“Hermione?” Harry questioned, reaching her side just in time to support her as she doubled over, retching helplessly. When she straightened up again, one hand pressed to her mouth, he was standing closely by her, one hand at her elbow, and then other

brushing her hair back from her clammy face. She suddenly realized the other odor she had smelled...death.

"I'm – I'm sorry, I don't know why I – I mean, I know what he's – what they're capable of...I just – " she stammered, feeling foolish, and watched Harry's eyes drift to the little hand and darken, but he said only,

"I wonder how the Muggle authorities missed that?" and winced over the impersonal last word. His eyes flickered gently up to Hermione's. "You okay?" She nodded again, shakily, and he proceeded over to the place where the hand reached out in death. He lifted some of the wreckage out of the way, and called, "Oy, Ron!" in a low voice.

They conferred together in low mumbles, effectively blocking their view from the little corpse, and Hermione was content, for the moment, to let them do so. She heard Ron clearly at one point.

"Not a mark on her. Had to be Avada Kedavra." She saw Harry's shoulders heave in a deep sigh, as he pushed up off of his haunches and stood.

"Can you levitate her, Ron?" His voice was low and tired. "I know where we can put her." He seemed subdued somehow, as if his earlier triumph with his magic and his shining confidence in her abilities to overcome their problems had faded in the shadow of the stark reality of Godric's Hollow. The little girl's forgotten body seemed to cement that for him.

She didn't really realize what he was talking about until they topped the slight rise, and saw what had once been the home of his babyhood, hidden by a copse of trees on the fringes of town. The small cemetery was within view, separated from the ruins by its white fencing...and by its unmarred appearance, except for two toppled tombstones, shining in the weak moonlight. Hermione thought that one looked as if it had cracked in two where it had fallen. Voldemort must have conjured the ones at the rally, she mused. As they drew nearer, she could see the gashes in the ground, the thrown earth, the two dark holes that they knew were empty. She glanced at Ron, and

saw his return look of comprehension. Of course, two ready-made graves, bodies conveniently removed...

They made their way through the cemetery gate, no longer thinking about watchful eyes, feeling somehow safe in assuming that there weren't any. The little girl's blond hair shone in the dimness, and Hermione winced when Ron, trying to steer her through the narrow gate, cracked her head on the post. She felt her gorge rise again, and fought for control, not understanding why she was suddenly going to pieces.

She rubbed clammy palms against her jeans, and felt her rapid breathing slow slightly, once the body had disappeared into the grave that had once housed Lily Potter. Ron almost perfunctorily began to replace the dirt into the hole from whence it had come, gesturing his wand with lazy flicks, his eyes distant. Harry stood next to him, hands bracketed behind him, looking as remote as Ron. Hermione supposed she could understand why. What words were there to say? They didn't know this little girl, her name, how old she was, who her parents were – other than the fact that they were probably dead too. Voldemort – or those following his orders – had killed her, but he had killed many, and would undoubtedly kill others. Hermione's stomach roiled uncomfortably.

She turned her back on the graveyard, and moved down to the far corner, where two segments of white fence met in a pretty column. She wondered at the cemetery being untouched, but figured that Voldemort had no agenda with the dead – save for the two bodies he had disturbed. She leaned over the fence, clutching the railing tightly beneath her hands, striving for a breath of clean air, but there was none to be had. The stench of decay and abandonment was strong. Hermione didn't realize that she was crying until she felt moisture drip on her hands.

"You shouldn't go anywhere alone," came a voice from behind her, almost stammering with uncertainty. Ron. She turned, dashing at the tears with the backs of her hands, her mouth twisting self-consciously, as she peered at her shoes, which were nearly lost in the grass that was starting to look ill-kempt.

“I – I – ” she started to defend her actions, but bit off her response, and replied simply, “I know.” Ron looked mildly surprised. She raised her eyes to his, and then looked past him to Harry, still standing by his parents’ former graves, looking tense and preoccupied. She felt awkward; she and Ron had not had a serious conversation in quite some time, both of them feeling grateful that the war took up so much of their lives that this fact could be overlooked. Are you sleeping with her? Yes. Her face burned, and she was thankful for the darkness.

“We shouldn’t stay here in the open. The Death Eaters could have patrols,” Ron said, after a constrained silence. Hermione nodded, glad that once again they could allow real life to intercede.

“We should go on to the house,” she added inanely, and Ron turned, saying,

“I’ll go get Harry.”

“No!” she burst out suddenly, over the end of Ron’s sentence, startling them both. “I’ll – I’ll go get him.” A flash of hurt glimmered suddenly over Ron’s face, vanishing so quickly that she thought she might have imagined it. She could feel his eyes on her back, as she proceeded up the slight rise to where Harry stood.

“Harry?” she ventured in a small voice. When he did not answer, she moved to his side, and threaded her arm through the crook of his. “Harry, come on, love. We should get indoors.” Clouds had begun to scud across the sky, obscuring the stars. “It looks like it could rain.”

“I wish we knew her name,” was all he said. She noticed that he had raised the bottom half of the cracked tombstone, blank white marble, to mark the spot where the girl had been interred.

“So do I,” she replied sincerely, her throat hoarse with tears. She tugged on his arm again. “Ron’s waiting.”

“If I had – ” he started, but floundered to a stop. She leaned her head on his shoulder, knowing what he had wanted to say.

“You can’t save everybody, Harry.”

"It seems I can't save anybody, Hermione," he responded in frustration.

"You saved me," she answered.

"That remains to be seen," he answered, sounding cryptic and downcast.

"You love me," Hermione continued, not to be thusly put off. "Whatever happens next...it's worth it."

"I guess I'm lucky that you're content with so little," he sniped, but sounded a little less dejected. Her eyes went to the half-tombstone positioned crookedly above the repositioned soil, and his gaze followed. "Are you okay? You – I mean – you were – " he gestured back toward the main part of town with one hand, apparently indicating her discovery of the body.

"Oh – yeah, I'm okay," she said in a flustered voice. "A lot – a lot has happened today," she finished lamely. Perhaps it was the knowledge, made visible by the little girl, that no one was safe. She was used to being at risk – but to see the truth so baldly, crumpled and abandoned in a ruined town, that nobody was safe, unless somehow Harry – the man she loved – could rid the world of this evil once and for all ... it was unsettling at best, and terrifying in a soul-crippling way at worst.

She looked up at him then, and kissed him, lightly at first, lingering momentarily, and then her cheek slid along his, until her head was cradled on his shoulder. She felt the strength and warmth of his arms around her, and reveled in it.

"I do love you," he said oddly, seeming to realize that he had not agreed, when Hermione had declared that he did. Her eyes crinkled at the corners, as she smiled at him ever so slightly.

"I know." They turned to proceed back to the main gate of the cemetery, and Hermione noticed, with a pang, Ron standing there, with his back studiously turned toward them. He was apparently

carefully surveying their surroundings, but was in fact ignoring them so emphatically, that he might as well have been staring at them.

“Ready?” Ron asked a little stiffly, without turning around. Harry delved his hands in his pockets, and looked, without any desire whatsoever, at what was left of the building that had once been his home.

“I guess...” Harry drew out, shuffling his feet in the dirt a little. Hermione eyed him sympathetically, and linked her arm through his, as they exited the cemetery and made their way to the Potter house in silence.

The house was much as they remembered it from the previous summer. More than half wrecked in the battle that claimed James and Lily Potter’s lives, the remainder was dangerously unstable and mostly gone over to ivy and weeds. It had been an eyesore to the pretty little village for nearly two decades, but Hermione could understand the reluctance of the villagers to do anything about it. They would have probably been hesitant to go anywhere near it, seeing as how a lovely young couple had been mysteriously murdered there – and their baby vanished into thin air. Plus, she supposed, Harry did actually own it, however ignorant the townspeople might have been of his whereabouts. Now, the point was moot, seeing as how the house looked better than most of what was left of the town.

They had stayed in the cellar last time, and it had made a passable headquarters. The floor of the house had shielded them from most of the elements, and a few well-placed charms did the rest. It also had two exits, one into the house, and one out into the back garden. They had decided against anti-Apparation wards during the horcrux hunt, simply because it blocked them from Apparating in and out as well, and they couldn’t very well be seen slinking in and out of the old Potter house. This one lapse in security had been covered by numerous concealing, silencing, and detection charms and wards, both around the house and the village proper, and their stay had passed without incident.

Hermione looked dubiously down into the dark maw of the cellar, after Harry lifted the ramshackle door back from its rusty hinges, which groaned loudly. The overgrown garden, all rustling noises and huge nebulous shapes of darkness, seemed foreboding somehow. Of course, she thought, last time we snuck in to scout out the situation, there were lights in the village and music – someone was having a party – and ... and now... Now it was completely different, silent and dark and destroyed and ... dangerous, a poised and waiting kind of danger, like an undetected predator content to bide its time before taking down its prey.

Or maybe I've just gone round the twist, she thought derisively, feeling the expectant eyes of her two best friends on her with concern. She shook off the dread, and shot a detection spell into the cavernous blackness. A moment later, a white spark flew back up the shallow stairs and flashed back into the tip of her wand.

"It's clear," she said, and began to trot down the stairs with a determinedly casual air. She knew that Ron and Harry had exchanged glances before following her down the stairs, and she called back softly, without turning around,

"I can feel the worry oozing out of your pores, both of you. I assure you I – " Whatever she might have finished the sentence with was cut off by a crack of breaking wood and a shriek, as she fell.

"Hermione!" She heard Ron and Harry in stereo just above and behind where she lay, cheek against the cool concrete of the cellar, spitting blood out of her mouth.

"Damn, I've split my lip," she said, touching the tender place tentatively with her tongue. She felt Harry's hands on either side of her face, though she could not see him in the inky blackness of the cellar.

"Are you alright? Ron, light your wand," Harry ordered, and Ron did so, it probably not even occurring to him to take exception to Harry's tone.

"That's not all you've split," Ron said, as their eyes recovered from the sudden spray of light. "Stairs are rotted through." She had stepped through – rather than on – the second step from the bottom, and it was only once Ron had said something that the pain began to radiate up her leg and make itself known. She bit back a gasp, and tried to turn over, pushing herself off of her stomach with abraded palms, and trying to extricate her leg from the splintered stair. The pain made her see stars.

"Wait, wait, Hermione. Don't move," Harry said, helping her twist around, as Ron gingerly freed her leg. As careful as the attempt was, Hermione felt the bones grinding against each other, and she felt herself growing dizzy and nauseated.

"Harry, I'm going to – " was all she managed before she threw up again, barely able to lean to one side in time. She felt Harry's cool hands on her temples, as he held her hair back, and she slumped against the comforting wall of his chest. "I hope you're up on your healing spells," she said to Ron, her voice slurring as she struggled to maintain cognizance of anything besides the throbbing pain in her ankle.

"Stun her," she heard Harry say, as if from a great distance. It sounded like Ron was arguing, but the words ran together, soupy and indistinguishable. Harry said something more emphatically, and she felt his hands again, fluttering around her forehead, stroking her hair. Harry knows it hurts. He wants to spare me the pain, while Ron heals my leg. Ron said something else; it sounded like a phonograph playing too slow; then a spell hit her, and everything went black. When she awakened, her head was pounding, her leg felt stiff and unwieldy, and her mouth tasted like it had been filled with metallic shavings while she slept. She groaned and shifted, but promptly decided that that was a bad idea, as the nausea threatened to well up in her again.

She opened her eyes to see Harry's concerned face hovering above her, and realized that the surface she had her head pillowed against was his lap.

"Hello, you," he said, as if trying to sound flippant, but Hermione could see the concern lurking in his brilliant eyes.

"Which one of you knocked me down the stairs?" she croaked.

"Ron, of course," he answered quickly, and they shared a smile. "Are you really okay?"

"I guess. Feel sort of sick still. Ron fix my leg?" she asked, keeping her questions of few words on purpose.

"Yeah," Harry said. His hands were in her hair again. She felt a fluttery stirring in the pit of her stomach. She craned her neck, attempting to extend her limited view of the cellar, and he gently pushed her back down.

"Where's Ron?"

"Went to do a perimeter," Harry said laconically. Now that they had completed their survey of Godric's Hollow, the next step was to establish subtle detection wards around the town, so that they could be notified the instant anyone approached.

"He shouldn't have gone alone!" Hermione blurted in alarm. Harry cocked an eyebrow at her.

"Who was going to go with him?" he asked, some of the bitterness back in his voice, though it was mostly lost underneath sarcasm. "The Boy Who Just Got Proficient at Wingardium Leviosa, or the girl who just fell down the stairs, broke her leg, and got sick all over the secret hideout?" Hermione raised her eyes to his with a look of chagrin. Of course, he was right. He gave her a smile, albeit a somewhat twisted and wry one, and ran his fingers lightly along her jawline, leaving tingles in their wake. She tilted her head back to regard him more closely, and he leaned down to kiss her.

"Harry, my mouth tastes terrible," she protested weakly. He almost grinned and his eyes twinkled, as he handed her her wand. She flung a coy look up at him, and cast a breath freshening charm on herself, feeling light-headed for an entirely different reason as she saw his

eyes darken with longing. When his lips touched hers, she felt her heart skip a beat, and she remembered the elated look on his face from earlier that morning. Hermione, look! It was as if a vista opened up in front of her, and she could see the future that they could have had... dates in London, sharing a banana split at Florean Fortescue's, perhaps a holiday on the continent, or a proposal somewhere terribly romantic.

Someday, Harry! Someday, we'll get that future, she thought fiercely, winding her arms around his neck, and opening her mouth to deepen the kiss. She felt his fingers skim the hem of her shirt, and began to slip upwards; his skin felt blazingly hot against hers. She arched her back a little, allowing him further access, tacitly granting permission.

Just when she thought she would melt into a lovely, warm puddle of Hermione-goo, there was an uncomfortable harrumphing sound from the stairs. She disengaged her mouth from Harry's, and would have propelled herself away from him, but still felt slightly swimmy-headed.

Ron was standing at the bottom of the stairs, having evidently trodden down them carefully, so as not to meet the same fate she had.

"You forgot to put your tie round the door handle, Harry," Ron said, his voice light and casual, but his eyes betraying the truth about how he felt about what he'd seen. Harry sighed, and ran one frustrated hand through his hair, while he helped Hermione into a sitting position with the other. Hermione let out a strangled kind of groan.

"Ron – "

"Perimeter's secure. There's not a soul within at least a half-kilometer of here," he continued in a business-like way, dropping his knapsack onto the dusty cellar floor with a scuffing noise. He wasn't looking at them, but there was pain evident in the lines of his spine and shoulders. There was a strained silence. "We should fix those stairs."

"Ron," Hermione tried again. "If – if it's just going to be us for – for awhile, shouldn't – shouldn't we discuss this?" Ron looked up and met her gaze squarely, his face bland, but his ears red.

“What is there to discuss?” he asked airily. “I love you. So does he.” He shrugged. “Only difference is you love him back.” He spread his hands in a voila gesture, as if to say, See? Easily summed up.

“I know you think you – ” she struggled, but the sudden look of anger on his face made her stop.

“You once said that I had the emotional range of a teaspoon, Hermione. It’s one of the only times I’ve known you to be wrong. I’ll be damned if I’ll sit here and let you say that I really don’t know my own mind – my – my own heart.” He cleared his throat abruptly. “I do love you. I’ve loved you for years, but I was too thick to realize it.” He jabbed a sharp glance at Harry. “Reckon I wasn’t the only one.” Hermione watched Harry meet Ron’s eyes for a moment, then lower his gaze to his hands, folded in his lap, white knuckles betraying the unspoken tension he felt. “I know you don’t love me, and I’ll deal with that. But don’t insult me by saying that I don’t really love you.”

Hermione felt as if she’d been stabbed in the chest by a cruelly honed blade. How could she explain to Ron that she couldn’t help how she felt about Harry? Or him? How could she communicate the perplexity of a feeling that seemed to have chosen her, rather than the other way round?

“It’s not anything we planned, Ron,” she mustered, feeling the excuse to be woefully inadequate. She was still reeling from his declaration of love, never having suspected his feelings to be that strong. The silence was thick and nearly palpable. She dragged her eyes – as slowly as if they were encumbered with heavy weights – up to meet his. “I’m sorry.” Her voice was a barely audible whisper, and the gasp of shock and surprise and hurt from Harry was easily heard in the sound-swallowing silence of the cellar.

She turned toward Harry so quickly that she thought she might have wrenched her neck out of place.

“Harry, that’s not what I – ” But her entreaty was halted mid-word, as Harry stood in one swift, fluid motion, and strode up the stairs, the wood creaking ominously beneath his feet. A rickety, hollow-sounding

slam indicated that he had exited the subterranean room, closing the door behind him.

Ron and Hermione sat in further silence. Hermione thought that the tendrils of tension would strangle her.

“What was that all about?” Ron finally asked, somewhat sullenly.

“He – he thought that I was sorry – that I was – that I regretted the fact that I love him. Nothing could be further from the truth. I just – I’m sorry anyone has got to be hurt because of me.” She looked at him with wide, pleading eyes, and held her hand out. He hesitated for a moment, but then came across to sit just opposite her, his back to the cellar stairs, and enfolded her small hand in his larger one. “I do love him, Ron.”

“I know you do.” This was said without inflection, negative or otherwise.

“I – it scares me sometimes, how much I love him. It’s – it can’t be quantified or analyzed or neatly sorted and put into a pigeonhole. It’s all-encompassing, overwhelming. Sometimes I think that I’ll be consumed by it, and I’ll – I’ll just cease to be who I thought I was.”

“You won’t ever,” Ron said, with a mirthless chuckle. “Harry wouldn’t let you.”

“I had no idea – I thought you just ... a schoolboy crush, you know. I didn’t know your feelings were ...” She floundered idiotically, and settled for repeating what she had said earlier. “I am sorry, Ron.”

“You didn’t ask for this,” he replied.

“Neither did you,” she interjected.

“Neither did he,” he parried back, and they both fell silent again. He let go of her hand, and she folded it with its companion in her lap. “The war made it easier,” he said presently.

“Made what easier?” She said automatically, even though she knew the answer, had thought the same thing herself.

“Pretending it didn’t hurt. Telling myself that being angry over something so – so small, when people were dying – had already died – was selfish and arrogant and – telling myself that we were likely going to die anyway, so how I felt or you felt or Harry felt didn’t really matter at all.” He cast a fleeting glance at her, and then fixed his gaze on the opposite wall, seemingly a million kilometers away. “It was Mum’s dream, you know. You and me, Harry and Ginny, all of us together at Christmas and birthdays, filling her walls with magical portraits of dozens of babies.” Remarkably, he said this without blushing, and then sighed. “... Now she’s dead, Ginny’s blind, and you – you – and everything’s changed forever.”

“But life doesn’t stop just because the world falls apart,” Hermione finished for him softly.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “You and Harry are proof of that. Of all the times to fall in love...” He tried to speak the sentence lightly, but his mouth twisted bitterly with the word ‘love’, and Hermione felt her heart throb painfully. She opened her mouth to speak, but he headed her off. “Don’t apologize again, Hermione. Please.” Her shoulders slumped, as her mouth snapped shut. “I s’pose this conversation was bound to happen... with this separation from the Order – nothing to think about but this.”

Hermione sighed. She’d wanted so badly for Ron to waltz up to them one day, smiling, giving them his blessing, and proclaiming that he’d been mistaken all along, announcing some girl or other as the true love of his life. It could still happen, she thought. Ron’s eighteen years old. And he’s always been the least mature of the three of us. She watched him tenderly for a moment, as every emotion he was feeling paraded in succession across his face. If I’m the mind of this Trio, and Harry’s the soul, then Ron is the heart. And when has the heart ever acted rationally where love is involved?

“You should go talk to Harry,” he told her, after another anxious silence. “He shouldn’t be out there alone anyway, much less in his

current temper.” She stood with alacrity, favoring her recently healed leg, but turned at the bottom of the stairs.

“Are you okay?” He hesitated a moment, as if debating how honest to be with her.

“No,” he finally said. “But he needs you.”

She tried not to notice, out of the periphery of her vision, Ron’s lanky form slump over his knees, and his face go down into the crooks of his elbows, as she walked gingerly up the rotting stairs. As she clambered over the doorsill into the cool night air of the rambling garden, she tried to close her ears to the strangled sounds of his repressed sobs.

She saw him almost immediately, even in the unnatural darkness of the Hollow. The clouds were patchier, allowing stars to peer through at intervals, but the night was still nearly absolute. He was sitting at the base of a low stone wall that had been covered over in ivy and moss, his knees spread wide, and his head cradled in his hands. She knew he’d heard her when the creaky door protested, but he did not look up.

“Harry...” she began, her voice all but swallowed in the continuous rustling of the breeze-strewn garden.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me, Hermione,” he answered before she could say anything else, his voice sounding dull and tired.

“I do when you have so obviously misunderstood,” Hermione corrected him, with some asperity to her tone.

“Have I?” He looked up at her then, one eyebrow arched inquisitively. She regarded him for a long moment, his face all valleys and shadows in the darkness.

“Harry, don’t expect me for one minute to – you can’t honestly believe that there is any sort of doubt in my mind at all about you – about us? It’s preposterous.”

“There’s no doubt in my mind about the way you feel,” Harry said, choosing his words carefully, picking his way along the sentence with the same care that one would use to walk a tightrope. Hermione mulled over his selected words for a moment.

“Then there’s doubt about the way you feel?” she finally said, her words sounding ponderous and weighty in the whispering garden. He sat up straight then, and she heard him take a deep breath, as if girding himself up for something. She felt dread grip her insides, as he lifted his face toward her, and opened his mouth to speak the words that – she knew – would sound the death knell of their relationship.

And then he faltered. His gaze dropped again, and she watched the black outline of his form crumple down and in on itself.

“There’s no doubt,” he said, as if that were something to be dreaded rather than celebrated. She sensed her advantage, and moved to his side, seating herself against the rock wall next to him. The stones retained the warmth of the sun, even though daylight had been a memory for a while. He turned to her, his face only inches from hers, his teeth bared in a panicked pant, almost like a cornered animal. They were practically breathing each other’s air.

“Why is that a bad thing, Harry?” she asked gently.

“Because I’m so damn weak,” he burst out in a voice of self-recrimination. “And selfish. If I had any kind of nobility at all, I’d send you and Ron away – somewhere where they’ve never heard of Voldemort or Harry Potter. You could learn to be happy with him; I know you could. And he loves you. ” He ran both hands rather jaggedly through his hair, and swore. “But all I want is you.” The sentiment fell out into the silence abruptly.

She understood what he had not said. All I want is you. I almost don’t care about anything else, and I feel guilty.

“Good,” she spoke lightly. “Because all I want is you. More than you know. I could never be happy – with Ron or anyone else – knowing that you were alone and in danger.” More silence.

“Ron said – ”

“Ron’s going to have to work out his feelings on his own.” She slanted a sharp look at him through her eyelashes. “Are you jealous of him?”

“Jealous?” Harry let out a short bark of laughter, but then became suddenly serious. “No, honestly, I’m not. I trust you. I know you love me. I trust him. If anything, he’s the one with the right to a grudge. Technically, I’m the one who moved in on you, after you and he... I can’t even imagine how I’d feel if the situation were reversed. But I – I can’t say that I’m thrilled to know that he’s going to be looking at you the way I look at you, and thinking about you the same way I do, and – ” He broke off with a frustrated sigh. “If he felt this way, why’d he have to come here with us at all?”

“Because I’m not the only one he loves, Harry,” she said in a low, intense way. “You’re still his best friend, and I think he wants to help as much as he can... regardless of how painful it might be.”

“For him, or for me?” Harry snorted. Hermione nudged him in the ribs in reprimand, but her lips curved in a smile.

“So what are you really afraid of? You didn’t really think you were in danger of losing me to Ron?” She asked him, after a reflective moment.

“I’m afraid of losing you at all,” he replied, impassioned.

“We’ve talked about this, Harry. Would your grief be lessened if I died, and we had never gotten together at all?”

“Of course not,” he answered roughly, as if the hypothetical were still something he’d rather not contemplate.

“Then staying emotionally distant from me won’t help anything, will it? And like Ron said before, pretending that we don’t feel anything won’t change the fact that we do. He knows it, and we know it. Why pretend?” She bracketed his face with her hands, and spoke to him with clear enunciation, emphasizing her words. “I love you, Harry.

And I'll love you until the day I cease to draw breath. There is no power on earth that can change that or take it away." His body remained tense for a moment, until he finally let himself relax, leaning his forehead against hers. He laughed shakily.

"Maybe after you've told me that a few hundred more times, I'll finally start to believe it."

"Believe it, Harry," she said throatily. Without breaking eye contact with him, she waved her wand in an arc around them, muttering a silencing charm, as well as the one that she'd performed the day they first kissed...Caecusco, that made Remus see the empty patio.

He turned quizzically toward her, lips parted to speak, but whatever question he'd nearly uttered died unasked, as she pressed against his shoulders, bearing him down to the cushiony bracken, in the shadow of the mossy rock wall.

The days slid monotonously into weeks. Hermione and Ron had a fairly substantial potions lab arrayed in one half of the cellar, and they puttered around in it for hours at a time, concocting potions and testing spells and spell/potion combinations. Truthfully, some of that time did devolve into shouting matches, generally about what Hermione was taking too seriously, or Ron wasn't taking seriously enough. Harry would usually ask them to stop in a tired voice, the way an exhausted mother might berate two of her squabbling children. He was unable to practice his magic, while Hermione worked on perfecting some kind of masking charm – or potion, though she thought a spell would be preferable – so he spent his time poring over *Hogwarts: A History*. Hermione was secretly quite proud of him for doing so; it seemed inevitable that they would have to make an attempt to infiltrate or take Hogwarts, and detailed knowledge of the school could only be an asset to their cause.

They had had scant communication with the Order. They had been able to scavenge supplies from undisturbed Muggle cellars, the Pureblood snobbery endemic to Death Eaters having forestalled any looting, and setting up a covert supply line through the Order was unnecessary. The Trio did know that the Order was safe, that they

had found a new haven somewhere or other, and that Ginny had had some bad days, but was overall adjusting well to her handicap.

August had shambled along into September, with no sign of a breakthrough with regard to a charm or potion that would successfully mask Harry's magic from Voldemort's detection. Hermione and Harry had continued to steal away to the garden every so often, and make special use of the Caecus and Silencio charms. She was sure that Ron couldn't help but be aware of what was going on, but the subject had once again morphed into the Hungarian Horntail in the corner that everybody studiously ignored.

Today was another such occasion. The sun was setting on the horizon, and Hermione lay sated in Harry's arms, magically concealed in what she now considered to be "their spot" by the garden wall. She sighed in utter contentment, nearly purring, and she felt the rumble of a chuckle low in Harry's chest.

"What are you laughing at?" she asked languidly.

"You," he answered, and she could feel him smiling into her hair. His voice sounded nearly slurred with peace, and it did her heart good to hear it. She was glad beyond words when she could be the instrument of his contentment, however temporary it was for both of them. "Like a cat curled up in a pool of sunshine."

She laughed, and her fingers played across the muscles of his chest under his unbuttoned shirt. Wind danced through the already mussed strands of their hair, and she shivered a little, shrugging her blouse back on over her shoulders.

"It's already getting cooler at night. What are we going to do when it's too cold to come out here?" she asked, fumbling with the buttons. He straightened his shirt, and she smoothed down her disheveled skirt.

"The charms work indoors too, don't they?" he teased, and she grimaced at the thought of doing anything – charms or no charms – with Ron in the same room. "We could send Ron out on longer sweeps. It's not like he doesn't know what we're doing."

"I know, but we're all three of us pretending he doesn't know, and right now, that suits me just fine," she responded archly. "Besides, once we've properly masked your magic, he can stop doing those sweeps alone. I really hate that." Harry and Ron had been adamantly opposed to her patrolling Godric's Hollow alone, while Ron stayed with Harry, and since Harry couldn't yet do magic, that left Ron with the job. She had been prepared to argue herself hoarse about how unnecessary their predictable macho protectiveness was, but the naked fear glinting in Harry's eyes changed her mind. He did not protest because he thought her incapable, but because he did not want to see her hurt. She could live with that.

They both reached for their shoes, and Hermione sighed as Harry picked a leaf from her tangled hair. He bent down and picked up the blanket that they had taken to bringing along with them, and when he straightened, their eyes met. They regarded each other for a long, solemn moment, in what was becoming a tradition for them. Back to the real world, she thought somberly. Back to potions and calculations and spell design. Her lack of success was beginning to do more than frustrate her, and Harry must have read the desperation in her eyes, for he reached out and clasped her hand.

"I think we should – " he said, when she went suddenly rigid, her head swiveling from right to left alertly. "What is it?" She squeezed his hand and shook her head.

Voices, she mouthed, not wanting her voice to keep her from hearing something important, and watched his eyes grow wary. They both crouched down again, careful not to dislodge any of the loose undergrowth that was now fading and drying with the approach of autumn. Hermione caught Harry's gaze, and made a quick gesture with her wand. She saw him relax slightly with remembrance. They were still concealed under the Caecus and Silencio charms, as long as they stayed within their radius.

"Perhaps it's Ron," Harry managed to say, unable to entirely abandon the urge to whisper.

"It's two people. They're close. I think – " Hermione stumbled to a stop, as two hooded figures entered the Potter garden through the

small gate that opened out into the little wooded area shielding the house from the remainder of the town. Hermione felt Harry's fingers clench convulsively around her own.

"Could you at least stand downwind if you refuse to bathe?" came a cultured voice with a tone of disdain. Hermione and Harry, concealed beneath their umbrella of charms, exchanged wide-eyed looks of horrified recognition.

The other cloaked figure made some kind of obscene gesture, which was obscured from the two watchers by the heavy drape of his sleeve, but which his companion saw clearly. The first speaker gave the gesturer a clout across the back of the head, and when the violence of the contact caused his head to snap forward, Hermione thought she saw the end of a rather beaky looking nose.

"Please don't tell me that's Malfoy!" Harry hissed in her ear, still whispering.

"It sounds like Malfoy. And I think the other one is the same one that scanned our Marks at the rally. Or his clone."

"Watch yourself, young master," Beaky Nose hissed, sarcasm fairly dripping from the last two words. "You've gotten your comeuppance, you have. Ain't nobody better than anybody else down 'ere."

"I still have my father's ear," Malfoy replied, for it was he. He had snapped his wand up toward his companion, and the sudden movement knocked his cowl back, revealing his unmistakable white-blond hair. For all his brave talk, Beaky Nose appeared to harbor some fear of possible reprisal from Lucius Malfoy. "It's bad enough that I've been forced to go on needless patrols to dead Muggle villages, but to be forced to interact with Replicants!" He made a moue of disgust, as his eyes tripped over the clone and continued around the overgrown garden. Hermione felt her heart stop in her chest, when Malfoy's gaze appeared to cross her own, even though she knew he could see nothing through the Caecus spell.

"Ain't so bad being a Replicant. Reckon the real Hoofshorn owes us though, seeing as how we're all workin' for the Dark Lord while he sits up at Hogwarts in the lap o' luxury." He gave a wheezy, braying laugh.

"Be quiet, you fool!" Draco said, as Harry nudged Hermione excitedly in the ribs. Hogwarts. It was something concrete, at least. "I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that you don't mind being the copy of someone who was utterly worthless in the first place."

"How do you know you ain't one?" Hoofshorn said suddenly, grinning unpleasantly. Draco stared at him, incensed, but clearly unsure how to respond. "I'll tell you how... the Dark Lord don't want any other o' you, seeing as how you couldn't even perform your firs' assignment correctly." Hermione assumed they were talking about Dumbledore's death, and from Harry's sudden, uncomfortable shifting, she guessed he'd assumed likewise. Draco's eyes darkened. Rather than answering Hoofshorn, he flicked a casual glance over the ruined homestead.

"This house gives me the creeps," he said, flicking a contemptuous glance over it. "It isn't any wonder Potter was born here."

"It wasn't like this when I lived here, you idiot," Harry muttered darkly. Hermione threw him a sympathetic smile and squeezed his hand again.

"If it hadn't been for him and his potty wee friends, I would have succeeded that night," he told Hoofshorn darkly. "It was his fault I – " The rest of Malfoy's absurd story was obscured, as Harry, incensed, said,

"I was Petrified under an invisibility cloak. How could I possibly have stopped him?" Hermione impatiently told him to hush.

"That's not what I heard," Hoofshorn wrinkled his protuberant nose, and the end result was truly alarming, Hermione thought. "I heard you just didn't have the stones to do it, that ol' Albus woulda talked you out of it, if the Potions Master hadn't happened along to save the day." Harry shifted uneasily again, looking agonized and ill. Malfoy turned threateningly to Hoofshorn, brandishing his wand again.

Hermione wondered how often Malfoy endured this kind of taunt over the last year.

“Who had the stones to curse Ginny Weasley in Hogwarts that night?” he asked quietly. “Who worked with Severus for a year improving upon the entire concept?” He flicked his wand lazily, and Hoofshorn very nearly cringed. “I could do it, you know.” There was a moment of heavy silence in the garden, unmistakably threatening. Hermione looked over to see Harry’s head in his hands, fingers threaded through the messy blackness. He seemed to be keeping himself beneath the charms by sheer will alone, knowing that he would be no match for two Death Eaters.

It was nearly night. Hoofshorn bowed his head uncertainly, appearing absorbed in the hem of his cloak, and Malfoy seemed to take that as evidence of submission. “I trust that I’ll hear no more on this subject,” he said as loftily as his father before him. He smiled, a tight-lipped affair without pleasance or mirth. “Now, let’s finish our circuit and get out of this forsaken place.”

He had no more than moved forward, when he stumbled, stepping into a small dip in the ground and losing his footing. He flailed a bit, but failed to find purchase. To Hermione’s horror, his trajectory took him straight toward the edge of the area she had charmed.

“Arresto —” she began, but she did not have enough time. Draco Malfoy plunged into their hiding place. She imagined that the way he completely vanished from the waist up would be quite alarming to his patrol partner.

The three of them stared at each other for a long, frozen moment. Hermione’s wand was trained on him, and Malfoy was decidedly at a disadvantage, lying full-length on the ground, picking bits of dead leaves out of his mouth, wand wherever it had flown as he’d fallen.

“Bloody hell,” the Slytherin said softly, as his gaze intersected with Harry’s. “Trysting with the Mudblood? Really?” His eyes roamed over their decidedly disheveled apparel, and he made a tsk-ing noise, as if Harry were a dear friend who had disappointed him. Hermione’s face burned.

“Do it, Hermione,” Harry hissed. Draco put his palms flush on the ground, on the verge of pushing himself back into a more upright position. “Do it. He can’t be allowed to let anyone know where we are.”

Hoofshorn was moving. They both saw it at the same time, as he surged forward suddenly, reaching out, evidently intending to grab Malfoy around the waist, and haul him out of whatever magical field he’d fallen into.

“Reducto!” came Ron’s voice, sounding frantic and nearly hysterical, though neither of the others could pinpoint his location.

Hoofshorn aborted his attempt to help Malfoy as the spell rushed by him with the hot hiss of singed air molecules. The reductor hit their Slytherin nemesis with all the force of a projectile, and all the air rushed from Malfoy’s lungs with an audible ‘oof’.

Hermione and Harry were propelled backwards by the force of Malfoy’s dead weight, and Hermione felt her head crack rather loudly against the crumbling stone wall. Something warm and wet was seeping into her clothing, her lap, her legs, and she looked at Harry with alarm. He was trying to push Malfoy’s body off of their lower limbs. He gave one final shove to Malfoy’s shoulder, rolling him off of them rather unceremoniously. Malfoy landed on his back, just to the side, and their clothing was revealed to be stained black with his blood.

Hermione tried to stifle an automatic gag reflex. There was a gaping hole where Malfoy’s chest had once been, but gurgling blood still bubbled forth. His eyes were glassy and unseeing, and even as they watched, frozen in shock and horror, his heart ceased to pump. There was a rattling sound, and then nothing. Draco Malfoy was dead.

“Stupefy!” Ron’s trembling voice reached their ears again, and Hermione saw Hoofshorn drop, near the garden gate, through which he had evidently been intending to flee.

“Finite Incantatem,” she managed shakily, and the concealment vanished, revealing Harry and herself, along with Draco Malfoy’s bloody corpse. “Ron?” she called out. There was a moment of silence, and an area of the hedge that bordered one side of the garden began to twitch and swirl, then wrinkled and collapsed to reveal Ron Weasley standing there, looking dazed, wand arm limp at his side, the other hand clutching the invisibility cloak.

“Merlin’s beard,” he said dully. “What the hell...? Are you two all right? What did he do?”

“It’s his blood,” Harry replied. “We’re okay.” He looked down and seemed to suddenly realize that his shirt was still partially unbuttoned, and moved his hands almost mechanically to fix it, even though said article of clothing was liberally coated with blood.

“I didn’t mean – the other bloke was running, and I didn’t know. I thought you were there, but I wasn’t sure. I was trying to hit him,” Ron stammered, gesturing toward the back gate, where Hoofshorn’s prone form lay, nearly concealed in the flora. He had moved toward them while talking, and so came to Malfoy’s ravaged body. Hermione saw his neck and jaw muscles work convulsively. “I’ve killed him, haven’t I?” he asked, in the tone of one unable to believe that such a thing has actually happened. He looked at Harry and Hermione, almost wildly, as if he believed that a judge and jury were going to emerge from the woods and sentence him immediately. “I didn’t mean to – I was – ” Hermione pressed her lips together, and moved to his side. She would’ve patted his arm in sympathy, but arrested the motion, when she saw that her hands were still sticky with blood.

“Don’t be sorry, Ron. He deserved to die,” Harry said in a calm and level voice, and Hermione wondered at the coldness with which he said it. If she’d had any doubts as to whether or not Ron or Harry had killed anyone in the battle at Hogwarts and Hogsmeade, they had now been put to rest. It seemed obvious that Ron hadn’t, and Harry had. With the return of his magic, he seemed to be turning back into the battle-hardened, world-weary soul that had landed on the rocks beside her that day near Hagrid’s hut, the one who focused on a goal and plodded tirelessly toward it, regardless of the risk to himself. “He let Death Eaters into Hogwarts. He facilitated the situation where

Dumbledore was killed. He helped Snape fine-tune the Nightmare curse, and he used it on Ginny. We heard him say so.”

It was almost scary, Hermione thought, how Ron’s face suddenly changed, became more icy, and less fretful. He looked down at Malfoy’s corpse with contempt.

“How did he know? About her worst nightmare?” Harry shook his head.

“I don’t know. I guess that’s something we’re going to have to ask Ginny.”

“He’s going to be coming around soon,” Hermione offered, gesturing toward Malfoy’s companion, trying to get her best friends’ minds back on the immediate peril in which they found themselves.

“What are we going to do with him?” Ron asked.

“We can’t kill him,” Harry said matter-of-factly. “Then others will come looking for them, and they might start watching these villages more closely. Obliviate him. Hermione, if you can push me into his mind – I don’t think I’m strong enough yet to do it on my own – I’ll plant new memories. He’ll think he killed Draco.”

“Won’t he run away to avoid punishment?” Hermione pointed out. “Then they’ll still be missing two Death Eaters. They’ll still come looking.”

“Not if I give him so much guilt and fear that he feels compelled to return to headquarters and confess,” Harry answered her.

“Can you do that?” Hermione winced, as her voice came out sounding very small. Harry flicked his eyes toward her, Ron, and then the ground, carefully avoiding including Malfoy in his field of vision.

“I think so,” he said slowly. He was clearly uncomfortable with his ability to do Mind Control of any variety. Hermione wondered if this was some more of the “extra-curricular” training he’d taken up, once he’d mastered Legilimency.

"But your magic. We aren't able to mask it yet," was Hermione's last protest. She wanted to wipe away the distant, tired look in his eyes. Had it only been moments ago that he had been caressing her with gentle fingers, worshiping her with his mouth and his eyes, smiling into her hair? She plucked uncomfortably at her skirt; the blood was causing it to cling clammy to her legs. She felt filthy, defiled, like she'd never be clean again.

"We'll have to leave here," Harry said perfunctorily. "Ron can pack everything up, while we're Obliviating him," he jerked his head in the direction of the back gate."

"What are we – " Ron cleared his throat, and tried again. "What are we going to do with – with Mal – with Malfoy?"

Harry was already moving toward the rickety door, to retrieve his wand from the cellar. He replied to Ron, without even pausing or looking over his shoulder.

"Dump him on the other side of the wall. Leave him to rot."

The cadence of her two best friends' breathing did not change as Hermione quickly slipped out through the door into the garden. She was careful to open it only as wide as necessary for her to slide through, and lowered it back into place as if it were made of spun glass. The wards were tuned to recognize her wand, and shimmered only slightly as she passed through.

She trod silently over to the wall, placing her hands on top of the rocks smoothed by age and moss cover. It took her a moment to be able to look over the wall to the knee-deep shrubbery, where Ron had dumped Malfoy's body, all the while exchanging concerned looks with Hermione.

"He can't be serious. He's just going to leave him there," she said in a heated whisper. "It's – it's barbaric."

"It's Malfoy, Hermione," Ron replied, seeming to take the whole thing more in stride than she was. "When has he ever acted like a human?"

But he was human. He was a boy – just their age – and who knew but that his family situation and the bigotry under which he'd been raised had never given him a chance. Obviously, he didn't have that deep-sown seed of nobility and character that had caused Harry to grow up such a beautiful soul despite the hardships he'd faced early in life.

This sudden implacability was unlike Harry, and it frightened Hermione more than she wanted to admit, even to herself. Even if we survive, who's to say that he'll ever be able to recover from what he's gone through? An unwelcome image of a powerful, malevolent Harry flashed through her mind, and she shook her head convulsively. No, she would not even entertain such a notion. Harry did not have it in him to go the way Tom Riddle had.

Staving off such unprofitable thoughts, she clambered over the wall, taking care not to step on Malfoy, wincing at even the slight noise that her trainers made when they contacted the ground.

Choosing a place, she made an arc with her wand, slicing a gash in the green undergrowth and revealing the earth beneath. With small scooping motions, and a muttered spell, she began to dig.

She and Harry had successfully Obliviated Hoofshorn earlier, and Ron had all of their equipment ready to go. They had determined to spend one last night in the Hollow, and to take their leave bright and early the next morning. Harry had not talked about what he'd seen in Hoofshorn's mind, but when he came out, he was grim and drawn, taut lines of fatigue mixing with righteous anger and resignation. He and Ron had Stunned the Death Eater, and dragged him some distance away from Godric's Hollow. Theoretically, Harry had explained, he should awaken with the memory of provoking and then dueling Draco Malfoy, getting off a lucky shot, and being unable to remember exactly what had happened next or how he got where he was. He would suppose that he had panicked. They had even smeared his cloak with Draco's blood before "escorting" him from the garden.

Hermione's eyes were burning with exhaustion and worried tears, as she continued to magically remove the soil from what would become Malfoy's final resting place.

"What are you doing?" A sudden voice in the stillness made her jump, and she nearly dropped her wand.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" she asked, sounding defiant, even though she really didn't mean to.

"It looks like you're out here wearing yourself out when you should be resting. He's past caring what happens to him, Hermione." Harry's voice sounded as weary as she felt.

"How'd you know I was gone?" she asked to deflect the subject.

"You think I can't tell when you're not near me?" he said. "Leave it, Hermione. We've got to get started early tomorrow. He's not worth it. After what he did –"

"I'm not doing it for him!" Hermione shouted suddenly, startling them both. "I'm doing it for me." The tears had finally spilled over her cheeks, and she brushed at them, irritated. She looked up at him, struggling to make out his features in the darkness, and implored him wordlessly to understand. Sentiment is what keeps us from being Death Eaters. "I told you once that you give me hope – even now – even after all that's happened, after everything we've lost. It – it scares me a little when you act like this whole thing might beat you after all." He stood very still, regarding her.

"I'm not going to end up like him, Hermione, no matter what happens," he said quietly, and they both knew to which him Harry was referring. "He didn't have anyone like you, now did he?" There was a moment of silence, and she found herself smiling gratefully, foolishly, even though he couldn't really see her. "All this because I didn't want to waste time burying Malfoy?" He asked after a beat.

Without waiting for an answer, he hopped lightly over the wall, using one hand, and reached for something propped nearby. Hermione didn't realize what it was until she heard a soft scuffling sound in the

dirt. He had brought out a shovel before their conversation. The conclusions made her sniffle loudly, and Harry stopped digging to ask her what was wrong.

“Nothing,” she said, in a watery way. “I love you.”

TBC

I sort of liked some of the introspection in this chapter. Hope you did too. There should be a little more transition before we move into the last act of the story – with the reunion with the Order, and the move to take Hogwarts.

You may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Sixteen: Cloak

Another gust of wind buffeted the house and howled around the copious cracks, sometimes whistling like a teakettle and sometimes moaning like a lost soul. Hermione shivered, even though the house was securely shielded against the elements. The stillborn start of fall had capitulated to winter early, and without much of a fight, in this untidy little village on the raw coastline of northern Scotland. The Trio had been here once before, during their hunt for the horcruxes. This was not just any Scottish village, but one where the Gaunt family had lived for a time – where Merope Gaunt had been born – in a manner somewhat more befitting the last of the Slytherin line. But that had not lasted, as they had been driven out under a cloud of invective and suspicion, the Muggle inhabitants of the village unknowingly fueling the fires of hatred that would be stoked in Marvolo Gaunt, transformed into madness in his children, and reawakened in his grandson and namesake... fires that Hermione feared would one day blaze up to consume them all.

The wind shrieked under the eaves, and Harry swore under his breath. He was cross-legged on the dilapidated bed, trying to read *Hogwarts: A History*, without any part of his body protruding from the blankets. Hermione looked at him with concern.

“Ron just renewed the heating charms,” she said, her brow wrinkling as she eyed him carefully.

“I know. I think that,” he pointed out the window, indicating the gray, forbidding landscape, lashed with rain that promised to soon be sleet, “makes it seem colder.” She stopped stirring the potion that she had simmering over the cauldron, and walked through the open doorway to where he was sitting in the bedroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, and the sad mattress protested a little.

“Are you really okay?” she asked. He was still too thin. She couldn’t help fretting over him, fearing in the back of her mind that he would slip away from her, that something beyond her control would just ... take him, and she would be powerless to stop it. One of her hands reached up, as though with a mind of its own, and her fingers

threaded softly through his disheveled hair. He leaned the side of his face into her caress, and sighed.

"I'm fine, Hermione. I just don't know how much longer we can keep this up." She looked at him quizzically, and he hastened to clarify. "I've got to train. I can't just keep sitting here, doing nothing with what little magic I've managed to regain." He looked at her apologetically, as if he didn't want to say what he was saying. "Are you any closer to a breakthrough?" She understood then. She was holding them up; everything hinged on what she could come up with, and she had come up with exactly nothing. Hurt flashed in her eyes before she could stop it, and he was quickly drawing her down in the pile of blankets with him, laying feather-light kisses in her hair.

"No, Harry, it's okay," she said. "I'm just as frustrated by this delay as you are. I just – any kind of dampening field would mask your magic, perhaps, but would also repress it. Spells would be more difficult and cumbersome to wield, and that certainly isn't going to help you at all. More general masking spells would hide magic in general, but Voldemort isn't tracing you the way Aurors would...he's connected to you. That scar links you, and I can't figure out a way to mislead that link." She shook her head, her fluffy ponytail arcing out behind her, and lowered her face into her hands. Harry's hands were softly playing along her spine.

"I'm sorry," he apologized quietly. "I didn't mean to – I don't want you to – the pressure, I mean – you shouldn't – " He swore under his breath, and Hermione gave a soft snort of laughter through her nose. She leaned into his warm embrace for a kiss, which he sumptuously bestowed on her lips.

Suddenly, she straightened, her eyes drifting toward the window, but not seeing the bleak weather beyond. Harry recognized the look.

"You've thought of something, haven't you?" By way of answer, she leapt up from the side of the bed, and began to pace the length of the small room, her fingers steepled in front of her, staring at nothing.

"A regular Concealment or Masking spell could mask most people's magic, but not yours in this case. Not yours."

“Right,” Harry said slowly. “Because of Voldemort.”

“Because ... of ... Voldemort,” Hermione echoed, drawing out the words, as she thought furiously. She continued to pace, pausing once at the window to say, “Here comes Ron.” There was a flash of brilliant color making its way along the gray crags with difficulty. A moment later, the door blew open, and a generous amount of rain and cold wind entered the small cabin along with their other best friend.

He shook water droplets from his hair, and cursed colorfully, as he closed the door and cast a drying spell on himself.

“My shielding spell got a hole in it, bloody thing,” he said, by way of explanation for his wet state. “It’s colder than a Yeti’s...” He cast a quick glance at Hermione and quickly swallowed the probably crude remainder of what he’d been about to say. “The baker asked about you,” he told her, gesturing toward the basket of groceries he’d set on the lopsided wooden table. A loaf of bread protruded from the top. “He offered to bring the food out to the house, but I told him that it made me look good – you know, all manly and heroic – braving the elements for my – my – ” he cleared his throat, and colored slightly, “little woman.”

This broke Hermione’s concentration enough for her to glower at him.

“Ron, you didn’t really use the phrase ‘little woman’?” Ron looked at Harry, still sitting on the bed in the other room, though the smallness of the house enabled him to hear everything with ease. Harry spread his hands wide, in a gesture that said, you’re on your own, mate.

“I might’ve,” Ron sniffed defensively. Hermione rolled her eyes and murmured something derogatory under her breath. They were letting the cabin, with Ron and Hermione posing as a young married couple, under the story that they had liked the area so much when backpacking through the year before (with a friend of theirs) that they had decided to return alone for a holiday. Harry had remained quite invisible, stuck inside the cabin, with no one in the village being the wiser about his presence. They had made few excursions into the village, only rarely for supplies or news, and, if Harry had been

bothered by their hand-in-hand strolls down the lane to the main part of town, he hadn't shown it. But Hermione felt guilty about it, and for her part, tried to lavish attention on Harry in the privacy of the larger bedroom that Ron had insisted they share. He was sleeping in the other bedroom, one so small that it might have been a closet in another life.

"So, what're you on about anyway?" Ron asked, after a moment. Even while Hermione's eyes had flashed at Ron with annoyance, she had continued to pace, and it was obvious that her mind was not really on the label Ron had given her.

"If..." Hermione started slowly, but picked up steam. "If we're going to mask your specific signature from Voldemort, then – then we'll need something designed especially for you, something built off of your magical signature."

"If you're going to key something to my signature, you're going to have to extract some magic...I'm not sure I can really spare any right now." Harry padded into the living room in his sock feet, walking over to stand by the fire, but giving her his full attention.

"I'm not extracting anything," she told him with a triumphant smile, having finally hit on a solution. "We're going to use part of your signature that has already been extracted." The three of them stared at each other for a moment, before Harry erupted.

"You are not going back there! You don't know who might be there. He could still be there, along with Merlin knows how many Death Eater clones."

"Harry, I've been working on this for weeks with no results. This has got to be it – the only way. The dampening field that Voldemort used on you should hold traces of the magic it withdrew. It should be relatively easy to come up with a suppressant for that exact signature, once we have it. I can't believe I didn't think of it before."

"And if it's not still there? What if he's used it on someone else?" Harry challenged, jutting his chin out belligerently. She sighed. There was no way he was going to let her go without a grand row.

"I think you're probably pretty much the only one he'd care to do that to, Harry. Anyone else would just get an Avada Kedavra between the shoulder blades," Ron said laconically. Harry shook his head.

"It's too dangerous."

"Why would they be guarding that room anymore, if you're not in it?" Ron pointed out, but earning the full power of Harry's glare for mentioning a point in Hermione's favor.

"You don't think Riddle House isn't going to be warded to the rooftop, whether Voldemort is there or not? You're not going!" Hermione felt the color rush to her cheeks, as her eyes snapped with anger.

"How are you going to stop me, Harry?" she asked, in an almost poisonously sweet voice, though she almost immediately regretted it. Harry flinched as though he'd been slapped, and Hermione was flooded with recrimination. Ron had vanished through the door to his bedroom, and Hermione was vaguely aware of a series of thumps and rustles drifting from there.

"I am aware every single second of every day of my ... limitations. You certainly don't have to remind me, Hermione," Harry rasped, almost as if he was in physical pain. He had one hand up on the fireplace's rough-hewn mantelpiece, and that alone seemed to be keeping him from falling down.

"I shouldn't have said that," Hermione admitted quietly. "And I didn't mean it like that. But I really think this could work. And if it helps you in your quest to fight Voldemort eventually, then it's worth the risk. I can take care of myself, Harry. I'll be careful."

"She's not going alone," Ron said suddenly, re-entering the room with a folded piece of parchment in his hand. He was looking at Harry, rather than Hermione, and an unspoken communication seemed to pass between them. Hermione immediately protested.

"You should stay here with Harry."

“Or let me go too,” Harry suggested quickly, but the suggestion was unanimously shot down.

“Harry, if we had to worry about defending you in an attack...” Hermione began, but her words drifted into nothingness. You’d be a liability, sweetheart. She was pretty sure that her eyes clearly indicated her agony, just as Harry’s stiffened stance and distant gaze indicated that he had understood precisely what she was not saying.

“Right...” he said faintly. His eyes were pools of self-loathing, and Hermione wanted nothing more than to pull him into the bedroom and show him exactly how worthwhile he was to her. She took a step toward him, her hand extended, but he shied away from her touch. She blinked at him, hurt.

“Harry should keep the invisibility cloak,” Ron said, after clearing his throat awkwardly.

“No!” was the instant response. “You take it. You’ll need it in that house.”

“Harry, we can use Disillusionment charms. The cloak is the best and easiest way for you to conceal yourself, should that become necessary. Keep it.” She looked rather blankly at Ron. “Where are the ward detectors? We’ll need them again.”

“Right here,” he said in a jovial tone, obviously pleased at having thought ahead of her. He tossed her one of the small objects cupped in his hand, and they each clipped one to the ends of their wands. “And!” he opened the parchment with a flourish, spreading it out on the ramshackle table. “Have a look at this.” He tapped the surface lightly with his wand. “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

Harry and Hermione both gasped in astonishment as familiar inky lines began to thread their paths across the crumpled face of the parchment.

“I’d forgotten all about it,” Hermione admitted helplessly, remembering the circumstances of that night. Ron had had the map with the team fighting in Hogwarts. And then the curse...Mrs.

Weasley, Ginny... and that had been Malfoy the whole time – Hermione still had trouble fathoming that. With all that had happened, it was no wonder the map had been forgotten.

“It ended up in the very bottom of my trunk. I might’ve mentioned it earlier, but I didn’t figure a map of Hogwarts would do us much good now,” Ron said. “But if Voldemort’s there, we’ll be able to see it, and then we’ll know where he isn’t.”

Hogwarts was teeming with small labeled dots, scurrying around the parchment like an anthill that has been stirred with a stick. Chestnut, raven, and ginger heads bent over it studiously, and for a moment, the shrieking wind and battering rain were the only sounds.

“Holy hell,” Ron said in disgust, as they sorted out the information that the map presented them. “Death Eaters in the Gryffindor common room. It’s indecent.”

“Look at these...” Hermione pointed excitedly, her finger bouncing over random areas of the school. “Here... and here... and here...” The boys looked. She was indicating a repeated name, Nathanael Applewood, found several places around the campus. Harry and Ron both drew their eyes up to meet hers, each blank expression saying, So? We knew about the clones already. “But look down here, in Slytherin house.” She pointed, and there was another rendition of Nathanael Applewood, but this one was...

“The ink is darker,” Harry breathed softly. They bent down over the map with renewed zeal, and found the pattern to be consistent. An uncloned person – or the original from which the clones were made – was indicated by much darker ink, while the clones were labeled in spidery, almost faded script.

“And look here,” Ron said somberly, pointing to a lone dot down in the lower dungeons. Neville Longbottom. The ink was heavy and black as jet. There was a moment of silence while they digested this.

“The cloned Neville is probably off of the potion by now. I wonder what the Order is going to do with him?” Hermione mused.

“With the Order gone from the safehouse, the Death Eaters don't know where Neville is, and can't get him the potion or give or receive information from him. They've got to assume that the Order knows he's not the real Neville,” Ron said. Harry was shaking his head before Ron even finished speaking.

“They either don't know the Order knows,” Harry responded, “or they don't think the clone of Neville is a threat.”

“Why's that?” Hermione asked, always pleasantly surprised when Harry's overly modest intelligence made itself known. Harry pointed at the small dot in the Hogwarts' dungeon.

“Because the original Neville is still alive.” Hermione met Harry's eyes, and both pairs were sober with realization. Harry was right, Hermione knew. If the Death Eaters perceived the Neville in the Order's possession to be a threat to Voldemort's interests, they would simply kill the actual Neville, and do away with both at once.

“There must be something they're waiting on, some reason they haven't done anything to him yet,” Hermione thought out loud, searching for a reason. There's always a pattern.

“One thing's for sure. We really don't have much time left,” Harry said, with no doubt in his voice. His gaze drifted disconsolately down to the map again. Hermione slid her hand over atop his, without speaking. He looked at her bleakly for a moment, and she parted her lips to speak, but they were interrupted by an excited bleat from Ron, as his long thin finger stabbed at the parchment.

A dark dot now moved about in the Headmaster's Office, a dot labeled Tom Riddle.

“He must have just come from the Floo,” Ron observed.

“The map doesn't recognize him as Voldemort,” Harry said softly, eyes glinting in appreciation of the irony.

“We should go then,” Hermione blurted rather abruptly. She watched as the light went out of Harry's eyes, and he disengaged his hand

from hers. "While he's – while he's there." Ron shouldered a knapsack, and handed Hermione one as well. "You've got your medallion?" she asked him, her hand going automatically to the gold chain around her throat. Ron nodded, and they both turned to Harry.

"Be careful, Harry," she said earnestly, and he shook his head bitterly.

"I'm not in any danger here," he said. She could tell that he was still upset, either about her going, or about her earlier thoughtless remark, she wasn't sure which. As Ron turned toward the front door, readying for Apparation, Harry seemed to waver on his feet. He appeared torn, and she guessed that his pride would have him march stodgily into the bedroom, as a child who's been left out of a game would. But his fear, the lingering worry that flickered in his green eyes, was keeping him in the room with her. He's afraid this might be the last time he sees me, and he doesn't want me to leave with him angry, she thought.

She moved toward him quickly, and laid one light hand on his shoulder, hurriedly brushing his lips with hers. He stood stock-still, as if keeping himself under very tight control, almost shuddering under her touch, but at the last moment, he let himself respond to her kiss.

"We'll be back soon, Harry," she whispered, and he met her eyes mutely, and nodded.

"Be careful." The pleading in his voice made it crack. He seemed almost surprised that he'd spoken. Her eyes crinkled at the corners in a slight smile, and she nodded, pressing her lips together tightly.

"We won't be gone long," she said, repeating her earlier sentiment to reassure both Harry and herself. Her eyes never left his, as she linked her arm through Ron's, and they Apparated away.

They ended up on the edge of the graveyard, close to where Hermione had first arrived on her rescue mission. She moved forward slowly, feeling somewhat heartened when the ward detector on her wand lit up at around the same place that it had last time. It meant that the wards were probably unchanged, and she knew how to get around those. Ron Disillusioned them both, while Hermione swiftly got them inside the wards.

“This place is bloody creepy,” Ron said, eying the tombstones uncertainly, as they trod carefully through the graveyard. He hesitated for only a moment in passing the Riddle family monument, and Hermione knew what thoughts were passing through his head – of Harry, and Cedric – for she had had them too.

The Riddle house was dark and lifeless, no hint of light coming from the grimy windows. If Hermione didn’t know better, she’d say that the house hadn’t been inhabited in decades. Releasing a breath that she hadn’t realized she’d been holding, she looked at Ron and inclined her head toward the house. They began to pursue a slow zig-zag course through the yard, using what cover was available. The horrid weather in Scotland was not present here, though the sky was gloomy and slate-gray with threatening clouds.

The ground-level cellar window was no longer open. Hermione bit her lip in consternation, though she couldn’t say that it really surprised her. Voldemort would have had his minions go over every square centimeter of the house, the grounds, and the wards to determine exactly how she had gotten access.

She looked at Ron again, who blended into the rolling hills and ruined township beyond, and he mouthed something. She was unable to make it out because of the charm, and shook her head.

“What do we do?” he asked in a barely audible voice.

“It’s a lot more risky to dismantle a house-ward,” she whispered back. “But we don’t have much choice. If they’re monitoring it – even from somewhere else – we won’t have a whole lot of time.”

“What about a monitoring charm?” Ron asked. “Like the one Tonks used outside Godric’s Hollow. We could at least find whether or not anyone’s here.” Hermione nodded, smiling gratefully at Ron’s idea, and cast the spell. A heartbeat later, a white spark flew around the side of the house and re-entered the tip of her wand.

“It’s clear. There’s no one here,” she hissed at Ron. He gestured toward the window, with an after you flourish, and she bent down to examine it. The ward detector on her wand glowed blue.

She worked for a moment, with Ron keeping watch behind her, her brow furrowed in concentration, muttering incantations low under her breath. Her wand moved in a rapid, intricate motion. There was a barely detectable shimmer, like the flicker of distant lightning, and just like that, they could pass through the wards. She threw a glance over her shoulder at Ron, and nodded, one downward jerk of her chin. She heaved the window open – it was stubborn with age and disuse – and lowered herself through the sill.

Ron followed, landing heavily, and chuffing up a cloud of dust that made him sneeze. The room looked the same as it had the last time she’d been here. It gave her an eerie, discomfiting sense of *déjà vu*. Ron must have sensed her unease, for he reached out and squeezed her hand. She smiled at him, and they moved out of the room and down the hallway. They were still Disillusioned, but they moved with more confidence, knowing that the house was empty save for them.

And then they were in front of the cell door. Hermione took a deep breath and twisted the knob. It gave easily, and Hermione was almost surprised. There was no otherworldly green light in the room, as the dampening field was no longer activated. Still the filthy padding that had been Harry’s bed was rumpled in the corner, and sinister, dark stains splashed the walls here and there. Hermione could still pinpoint the bloodstain that had come from the Muggle girl Polyjuiced to look like her. The room gave her chills, and she eyed the one-way glass uncomfortably. Suppose someone is watching, she couldn’t help thinking, even as she dismissed the notion as absurd and dropped her Disillusionment. Ron did the same.

He was gazing around with a nauseated look on his face. She saw his eyes move around rapidly, hesitating ever so slightly on the stains and the general squalor that the room afforded. She knelt by the ring of green stones, darkened now, but still inset securely into the paving stones, while Ron moved restlessly around the room, keeping one eye on the door.

She murmured a slicing spell, but it wasn't strong enough to go through the stone, and she didn't want to risk destroying one of the green stones that would power the field. She gouged at the surrounding area with mild reductors and even tried prying at it with her fingers, but to no avail. She sat back on her heels and cursed, while Ron eyed her with amusement.

"Looks like you've loosened it some," he remarked, kicking at the yellowed pile of rags in the corner, with distaste on his face. "Why not try a Summoning charm? Accio repository stone," he said off-handedly.

One of the green gems rose up from the floor rather abruptly, as if it had been struggling to work itself free, and had only just managed it. Ron caught it lackadaisically in one hand, unable to conceal a grin at the look of unadulterated amazement on Hermione's face.

"It's almost insulting how surprised you look," he said, handing her the rock.

"How did you know what they were called?" she asked, as he offered her a hand up from her knees.

"I can read – and sometimes without anyone making me," he retorted in an injured way. He scuffed at the bedding again, and shook his head in disbelief. "We should go while we can," he said. "It's a wonder no one – hullo, what's this?"

His final kick of the pile of cloth had unearthed a scrap piece of parchment, a corner of it stained rusty red-brown. He unfolded it gingerly. The back of it held some kind of schedule, reading: Strategy 8-10, Legilimency 10-12, Hand to Hand 13-15, Dueling 15-17, Defense 18-20.

"That's Remus's writing," Hermione remarked, having come up beside him to examine the paper. "He must have made that out for Harry – a training schedule." Ron flipped the parchment over, and saw a missive scrawled in Harry's cramped hand.

“Where did he get a quill and ink?” Hermione wondered aloud. Ron thrust the paper at her hastily, flushing a shade of red that was brilliant, even in the dimness of the cell.

“It’s for you,” he mumbled, and she dropped her eyes to the parchment curiously.

Hermione,

Ron suddenly snatched it back from her, causing her to make a noise of angry protest. He shook his head resolutely.

“Away from here first. Then, you can read it.” She flushed crimson, realizing that she very well may have sat down in Tom Riddle’s basement, in the very room in which Harry had been held captive, to read this letter.

“Of course,” she said faintly. They made their way in silence back to the cellar window through which they’d entered, and recast their charms. Ron gave Hermione a leg up, and then clambered out himself. The clouds were thicker now, and a brisk wind tore at their clothing and hair. The hill on which the house was situated gave them a good vantage point over the surrounding countryside and the village that had once been Little Hangleton. It too had been decimated, suffering much the same fate that Godric’s Hollow had.

He took her arm as if to Apparate away, but she shook her head quickly. The Disillusionment charm caused the air to ripple outward wildly as she moved.

“We should get out of here, Hermione,” Ron hissed.

“I don’t want to read this in front of him,” she insisted stubbornly. Distant thunder rumbled, and she pointed down to the village. “Let’s go down there.”

They meandered down into the village, taking shelter inside one of the most intact buildings left, one that had once been a florist’s apparently, judging by the large quantity of smashed glass and the bits and scraps of dried, dead flowers that littered the room.

Hermione was glad to be out from under the eye of the looming old manor house, and wondered how many in the village had felt the same way. Ron gave the shop a quick once-over, sealed it off, and remained stationed at the front door. Hermione settled on a stool behind a high counter, the fragrant aroma of flowers still lingering lightly around the room like a ghostly presence.

“Here,” came one clipped word from Ron, and she looked up in time to see the folded square of parchment come sailing towards her. She caught it between the palms of her hands, and opened it up, trembling slightly.

The writing was sloppy and scrawled, as if someone were in a hurry, possibly making an effort not to be observed. As Hermione scanned the parchment, looking more at the physical aspects of the letter than the words it contained, she noticed that the hue of the ink changed several times, and she wondered again how he had obtained the quill and ink. Her eyes finally drifted back to the top of the page.

Hermione, (it read)

I know it's not likely that you'll ever see this, but I had to try and write anyway. I saw you last in the Forbidden forest, after Lucius Malfoy had taken my wand. I hope you made it. I hope you and Ron are okay. I wish I knew for sure.

I'm going to die.

Hermione stifled a sob, clapping a hand over her mouth at the frank words, even knowing in hindsight that it had not happened.

Voldemort's got me, and he and Malfoy have been draining away my magic. Soon there won't be a thing I can do to stop him. I've failed, and I'm so ashamed. All the people who have died, and I couldn't even succeed at the task I was supposedly born to do...

Hermione, I wanted to thank you for always being there for me. The night I dragged Ron up to the girls' loo was the best one of my life. It brought me you, and I could never have done what I've done without

you. You gave me strength, and thinking of you, I think I can face anything, even Voldemort, even death...

This word was written very hastily, and dwindled messily down the page. If Hermione hadn't known for sure that Harry was safely ensconced in a cabin in Northern Scotland, she would have feared the worst. He must have been interrupted, she guessed, and had to hide the parchment.

It's amazing how brave I can be when I know you'll never read this. I suppose the worst it can do is give Voldemort something else to laugh about after I'm gone.

I love you, Hermione. I wish you could know how much. I'm not even sure I realize how much. I wish I had known before you and Ron had gotten together. You have no idea how hard it's been to watch you together, and wonder if it might have been different if I had just opened my mouth sooner.

I can see your face so clearly in my mind right now. It's almost as if you're in the room with me. But the way I like remembering you best is hunched over a pile of books in the library, writing so fast that your quill's a blur, everything in your face scrunched up in concentration. You're beautiful all the time, but I think those are the times when your soul lights up your eyes.

I sometimes used to see myself in a little cottage somewhere – Hogsmeade maybe, if it hadn't been destroyed – living there with my wife, maybe working at Hogwarts, with a back garden full of sprogs. The only person I could ever picture as their mother is you. I think I'll regret that most of all. I always wanted a real family – like Ron's.

He must have been interrupted again, for when the writing resumed, it was much scratchier, nearly illegible.

Damn it, I think they've broken my fingers. I don't know how long I was out, but they'll probably be back soon. Voldemort must know the horcruxes are gone, because he hasn't faced me yet. I'm sure he will soon, to put an end to all of this. I wish I could tell everybody how unbelievably sorry I am.

He knows, Hermione. I tried to keep him out, but he went into my mind, and he found out about you. At first he thought it was Ginny, but now he knows. If anything happens to you because of my failure, I will never forgive myself.

I'm going to pretend that you've escaped, that you're fine – you and Ron – and that you'll live happily ever after together. You'll have lunches at the Burrow on Sundays, and Mrs. Weasley will cluck over when she's going to get any grandchildren and embarrass all her kids. Ron may not say it often, or say it well, but he really does fancy you quite a bit, Hermione. I guess I won't mind so much, as long as I know that you're happy and taken care of.

I will love you forever,

Harry

By the time she had gotten to the signature at the bottom of the parchment, she was sobbing freely, tears flowing down her face as if she had an endless supply of them. She was struggling to refold the paper, but the tears had blinded her, and she dropped it. Ron came over from his post at the shop door, and picked it up, folding it deftly, and tucking it gently into the pocket of her cloak, his face a mask, alert and all business.

"Looks like another patrol is on its way. Let's go home," he said. They Apparated with dual cracks into the main room of the tiny cabin. Harry had been reading again, but leapt from the mattress, knocking the revered old book to the floor heedlessly, at the sight of Hermione's swollen, tear-stained face.

"What the hell happened?" he exclaimed wildly, looking to Ron, as Hermione launched herself at him, locking her arms around his neck, and reveling in his nearness. He was toasty warm from where he'd been huddled under the blankets, and he smelled like a library. She looked up into his face searchingly, and saw that his anger from when they'd left had been forgotten. She saw only concern for her blazing from his green eyes.

"We... erm, we found your letter," Ron told him uncomfortably, hoisting his knapsack off his shoulder, unsnapping the ward detector from his wand, and laying the two pieces on the table, along with the repository stone they'd retrieved.

"My letter? What letter?" Harry shook his head, clearly confused. Hermione was still sniffing into his shoulder, and she knew that she was making his shirt all wet.

"This one," she said croakily, pulling it out of her pocket. -ueling 15-17, Defense 18- was clearly visible in their former professor's looping script. She watched Harry carefully, and saw all the color drain from his face as he recognized the parchment.

"Did you read it?" he asked Ron, looking at him almost furtively. Ron's face was inscrutable.

"No," was all he said, busying himself with the objects on the table. Harry looked as if he might like to explain what he'd written to his best mate, but Hermione was steering him into their bedroom and closing the door. With a nonchalant flick of her wand, she had cast a Silencing spell. Harry sat down on the bed, but Hermione carefully picked up Hogwarts: A History from where it had fallen, and set it back on the mattress.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently, brushing at the traces of wetness on her cheeks with his thumbs. She nodded, even as she felt the stinging onslaught of renewed tears prick her eyes. "I'm sorry it upset you. I never really thought anyone would read it."

"It just reminded me what a close shave we've had," Hermione said, rolling her eyes at herself, with a wobbly smile. "I don't know why I'm such a waterworks today. I'm acting like an idiot." Harry leaned his forehead against hers, and smiled apologetically at her. She closed her eyes, could feel his thumbs still moving gently over her jaw line, her cheekbones, and into her hair.

"Did you mean it?" she asked presently.

“What? The letter? I meant every word. Most people don’t lie when they think they’re about to snuff it,” he spoke the last sentence lightly, but Hermione still flinched. She focused on the hem of the rumpled blanket, rolling it between her fingers.

“Did you mean the part about the cottage? About children?” Her voice was low, nearly a mumble. He kissed her softly on the temple, and she could feel his lips part in a smile.

“I meant that most of all,” he whispered into her hair, and her heart felt like it would surge upward out of her chest. His lips found hers then, and they clung together, even as a few isolated tears wended their way down her cheeks.

“So, do you want to – someday?” she said, striving to sound casual, but figuring that she was failing miserably.

“Have kids? With you?” he asked, cocking a quizzical eyebrow at her, as if the idea had never occurred to him. But in the next instant, he was kissing her as if her lungs would provide him with air to breathe, and she felt herself being borne back onto the sagging bed, Harry’s comforting weight atop her. He paused to brush a few strands of hair out of her face, and looked at her in a way that made heat suffuse Hermione’s face.

“Only if you’ll marry me first,” he whispered, and Hermione could have sworn that her heart missed a beat.

“Okay,” she whispered back, nodding, sliding her mouth against his as she did so. She would have pursued this avenue further, but he stopped kissing her, and looked at her as if her answer surprised him.

“Really?” She hit him half-heartedly on the chest.

“Of course, really,” she replied.

“No backing out if I happen to survive?” His smile was cheeky, but his eyes were disarmingly tender. Hermione was so glad he appeared to have gotten over the black mood he was in when they left for the Riddle house. And she was even more humbled and grateful by the

fact that she could improve his moods, that she made him happy. She had spent so much time in Muggle schools, and initially at Hogwarts, being generally overlooked, that the fact that a boy – a man – could so desire her and be influenced by her, was still a little difficult to believe.

“That’s not funny, Harry,” she reprimanded him, and he responded by kissing her quite thoroughly again.

“No, it’s not,” he agreed. “My heart would be completely crushed.” She glowered at him, but her mouth twitched traitorously. He laughed, and his eyes lit up. Her heart sang. When the war is over, I want this again, she pleaded, not even sure to whom she was raising her supplication. Please let me – let us – have this again.

After a quite enjoyable hour or so holed up in their bedroom, they were interrupted by an awkward Ron, rapping on the door, but not opening it, and reminding them that there were tasks at hand.

“So you found it then?” Harry asked, giving her a hand up, as they smoothed their disheveled clothing and left the bedroom. She grinned at him, though feeling somewhat ashamed that what was important could be so easily driven from their minds in pursuit of more carnal things.

“We found it,” Ron answered, gesturing to the benign looking green stone on the table. Harry picked it up, and eyed it rather dispassionately.

“So what happens first?” he asked.

“I think first we have to activate it,” Hermione said, reaching for her wand.

“The hell you do!” Harry said, tossing it back to the table’s surface, where it clattered loudly, and startling the other two with his violent reaction. “Do you know what this thing did to me the last time it was active?”

“Harry, calm down,” Hermione told him evenly. “There’s only one of them this time. There were two or three dozen embedded in the floor of that cell. Besides, I only need it active long enough to extract the essence from it... I hope it will be like extracting components from a potion – shouldn’t take long.” Harry appeared to be slightly mollified, but he still walked to a point that put him as far away from the table as possible.

She carefully cleared off the table, and laid the green rock down in the center of it. Taking a deep breath, her glance bounced up to Harry over in the corner, and then back down to the repository stone.

“Opero,” she intoned, tapping the rock lightly with her wand. There was a rushing noise, and beams of light shot out from the different faces of the rock, before it settled down to a dull glow and a low buzzing hum. She used the fishing-rod motion that she and Fred had used to extract Neville’s potion ingredients, but the repository stone was hesitant to give up its secrets. Finally, a small wispy curl of mist began to poke itself up from the top of the stone. Hermione pulled harder, muttering aiding incantations under her breath, as she heard Harry gasp. A quick look told her that he was beginning to slump in the corner. “I’m trying to hurry, Harry!” she assured him, in a voice that was only slightly frantic.

What seemed like ages later, but was probably only a few minutes, she had pulled the entire strand from the stone. Ron had dragged a chair over to Harry, and had helped him to sit.

“Finite Incantatem,” she said hastily, tapping the stone again, being careful to keep the thin strand hovering above it. “Harry, are you okay?” He was pale and clammy, with sweat beginning to bead on his forehead and temples.

“I think so,” he said heavily, already beginning to sit up straighter, once the repository stone had been deactivated. “Did you get it?” Hermione nodded in triumph, and then turned her attention to the glowing strand of magic.

Within moments, she had created another strand that floated there next to the first, coiling and writhing in an exact mirror image. Ron

and Harry had come to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with her, watching curiously as she manipulated the magic. She then cast a Concealment charm on the inactive stone, causing it to disappear, and then slowly extracted the charm that she had just cast. Instead of green, it glowed a translucent pale gold, and hovered there in space next to the other two.

“Spells leave the wand too quickly to be caught,” Hermione said out of the side of her mouth, her eyes never leaving the three hovering strands of magic. “It’s easier to cast it on something, and then extract it.” Ron looked at her in wonder.

“Where the bloody hell did you learn this stuff?” he asked.

“I can read,” she said haughtily, mocking the tone of voice he’d used with her earlier, and they shared a smile. She could feel Ron’s careful gaze flitting from her to Harry, and she knew that he was burning with curiosity regarding the contents of the letter. She also knew that he’d rather die than ask about it, and she wasn’t sure that his reading it was a very good idea anyway.

“So, now what do you do?” Harry asked in a hushed whisper, watching the sparkling strands roil and gyrate in mid-air.

“Now,” Hermione said slowly, grabbing the mirror-image strand with her wand, and maneuvering it toward the Concealment spell, “we put this bit of magic – that’s the ‘opposite’ of your magical signature – inside the Caecus spell.” With a little flourish she did so, and the hybrid spell changed to a deep, shimmering orange. “And it’s ready to cast.”

“Just like that?” Harry queried. Hermione returned Harry’s magical essence to the repository stone, and tucked the stone into her knapsack.

“Just like that,” Hermione affirmed. At the boys’ questioning glances, she jerked her chin toward where she’d placed the stone. “We might need it later.” She laid her wand down on the table, and wiped sweaty palms on her jeans. “Are you ready to try it?”

“What? Now?”

“No time like the present,” she said, seeming slightly amused. She picked up her wand again, and a swirling motion drew the new spell into the tip of the wand. Giving Harry no warning at all, she simply said, “Caecusco Magus.”

The spell shot in an orange streak toward Harry, hitting him squarely in the chest, and diffusing all over him in a kind of translucent ripple. Harry and Ron both stared at Hermione, startled, but Harry seemed to relax when he didn’t immediately grow an extra limb or turn colors.

Hermione muttered a detection spell under her breath, and said,

“Now, Harry, cast a spell.”

“Wingardium Leviosa,” he said hesitantly. A crumpled dishcloth began to rise from its resting place next to the sink.

“Did it register?” Ron asked curiously, leaning over Hermione’s shoulder. She smiled in wild glee.

“Not a thing!” she exclaimed. She turned toward Harry, who let the rag plop softly back to the sink, her mouth open, as if she was going to say something else, but he snatched her up in his arms, whirling her around.

“You are bloody brilliant,” he whispered in her ear, his breath feeling hot with promises in her ear.

“But Harry,” she protested after a moment of enjoyment in his arms. “There’s no way to know whether Voldemort detects you. The only way to tell is – is – ”

“By whether or not he comes after us,” Harry finished for her grimly, exchanging a somber look with Ron. “Then we can’t go back to the Order yet. Not until we’re sure.” Hermione pressed her lips together in sympathy, and shook her head, wordlessly agreeing with Harry.

“You’ll have to start doing some magic though, right, mate?” Ron asked, a little anxiously. “There’s no way to know if – if Voldemort can track you, without your doing any magic.” Hermione looked back at Ron, with large pensive eyes.

“He’s right, Harry. It’s the only way I know of to test it.” Harry’s eyes flicked toward the windows, where the slate-colored sky was as forboding as ever, but the rain seemed to have finally stopped.

“What about the village?” He asked, nodding his head toward the bend in the road, where the village lurked just out of sight around the foot of a jutting hill. Hermione’s hesitance gave him his answer. “I don’t want to put them in danger. That Levitating spell was probably okay since it wasn’t long, but I shouldn’t do anything more. They’re Muggles – they won’t be able to defend themselves against Death Eaters.”

“Then I suppose we should leave again,” she sighed. Ron had already moved toward the doorway of his bedroom, apparently planning on repacking his trunk, when his movements were interrupted by an ear-splitting explosion that rattled the window glass in its panes and vibrated the planking beneath their feet.

“What the – ?” Ron managed to say, and Hermione glanced at them both; they looked as mystified as she. There was a flicker like distant lightning, and at the same time, something began to wail shrilly. Hermione rushed to examine a blinking indicator – previously invisible – that had appeared on the wall above the fireplace.

“Somebody’s crossed through the wards,” she reported frantically. “Two, four, eight... eleven, fifteen people – fifteen wands...” They exchanged ominous looks.

“Harry...” Ron said tentatively. “He couldn’t have traced you – the Wingardium – that quickly? How is that even possible?”

“No,” Harry’s voice was level and certain, and his face was as grim as death. “It’s the village. He’s destroyed every Muggle village that can ever possibly be associated with him. Now they’re here.” He shook his head. “We were fools to come here. We should have known.”

“He hadn’t crossed the Scottish border before,” Hermione protested, wanted to absolve him of his guilt. “There was no way to know he’d come here too. They obviously have no idea we’re here. We should go before they – ”

“No!” Harry’s outburst surprised her into silence. “I’m not leaving them here to die. You know he’s ordered the Death Eaters to kill them all.”

“Harry,” it was Ron that spoke up this time, “mate,” he tried gently, “if any of the Death Eaters get wind of you, that’ll bring Voldemort and every Death Eater in Britain here faster than nifflers storming a gold mine.”

“Not if they don’t know it’s me,” he replied. “Hand me the cloak.” Precious moments later, after swiftly cleaning out the cabin and securing their shrunken trunks in the bole of a tree, the Trio were slinking from the isolated hut, able – once outside – to clearly hear the wails of terror and the zing of curses flying. The granite sky had taken on a distinctly orange hue. Harry was under the invisibility cloak at his friends’ insistence, since his magical ability was all but negligible, but he had refused to remain behind. They were Glamoured slightly, and Hermione hoped that it would be enough to fool Death Eaters at a smoky distance, especially considering that they weren’t expecting any wizarding presence at all.

“Look there!” Ron hissed, as they rounded the humped shoulder of the hill, keeping as close to the shadowed side of the road as they could. A knot of terrified Muggles were concealed in a small lane behind the bakery, hunched behind the trashbins. There were shouts from the far end of town, which was already ablaze, but the Death Eaters had not yet made it to their side. Hermione shook her head in disgust; so confident in their murderous victory were they that the Death Eaters had not even bothered to surround the town.

There was a wailing screech of tires and the ghastly sound of rending metal, punctuating by hoarse inhuman laughs. A rush of air and a billow of sparks could clearly be seen, as a desperate Muggle behind the wheel of a car evidently crashed into a burning building.

“Psst,” Ron hissed, as they reached the knot of Muggles. There looked to be about fifteen. The baker jumped and whirled, raising a long knife in a defensive gesture. Ron and Hermione held up their hands in the universal gesture for peace.

“Mr...McWhorter?” The baker said curiously, using the pseudonym they’d given him, squinting at him in the unnatural dimness provided by the smoky backdrop.

“Sme,” Ron confirmed. “We had to... change our appearance a bit.” He nodded toward the fiery town. “What’s going on?” The baker shook his head in incomprehension.

“It’s like Armageddon,” a woman wailed softly, and there was a murmur of agreement.

“They’ve cut off the road?” Hermione asked urgently. The baker nodded.

“They’re everywhere at once – moving like lightning. I’ve never seen anything like it. This end of the road is useless – it winds past your cabin for about a half-kilometer, and then ends at the sea,” he informed them. Ron and Hermione exchanged long looks, and then Harry wrenched the invisibility cloak off impatiently, causing frightened cries to erupt from the villagers.

“We’ve got to do it. We’ve no choice,” he said heatedly.

“Harry – ” Hermione berated him in an annoyed tone. A horrendous, unearthly screaming pierced the air, and the Muggles huddled together reflexively out of fear. The Trio exchanged looks again. Someone was being Crucio’d.

“Where’d you come from?” the baker asked, suspicion and doubt igniting in his eyes.

“Listen to me, and listen well,” Harry said intently. “These people attacking your homes are – are different from you. They can’t be reasoned with, and you can’t fight them. They have...abilities that you

can't even imagine. We can get you out of here, but you're going to have to trust us." There was a pause that seemed to last an eternity. Hermione's pulse was racing, blood roaring in her ears for them to hurry, hurry, hurry.

"If we don't..." the baker drew out hesitantly. The other in the group seemed to be looking to him for guidance.

"Then you'll die." Harry was not mincing words, and Hermione winced a little, as another inarticulate cry rose up on the wind. The baker looked over his shoulder at the approaching destruction, then looked back to the Trio and nodded.

"Then we've no choice, do we?" Harry's eyes indicated his approval, and he drew Hermione and Ron into a knot, a short distance away.

"Harry, what are you doing? You know the rules... you know..." Hermione stopped, floundering for a moment as she remembered that the old rules no longer applied, because the old world order had been obliterated.

"Look, you two can Apparate them out...it doesn't really matter where. Then, Obliviate them if you like. But we can't just leave them here to die. You saw what happened at Godric's Hollow and Little Hangleton!"

"What are you going to do?" she asked, laying a concerned hand on his arm. By way of answer, he threw the invisibility cloak back over his head.

"I'm going to see if there's anyone left alive. If I find anyone, I'll bring them back here to you," he said in a slightly muffled voice. Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but stopped, correctly assuming it to be pointless. He reached out and caressed her hand lightly with an unseen touch, and then, with the faintest ripple on the breeze, he was gone. She stood there for an instant – an age – longer, and jumped violently when Ron touched her arm. He didn't say anything, but merely jerked his head in the direction of the knotted clump of frightened Muggles. She tore her eyes away from the mouth of the alley, twisted around, and followed Ron, vaguely heard him say,

“All right, let’s go.”

“What are you going to do?” A woman in the back of the group, with two children clinging to her skirts and a baby in her arms, said, her voice quavering with fear.

“We’re going to get you out of here.” There was a roaring of escaped flame as a building collapsed in on itself. The fire was getting closer. “Where’s the nearest town?” Ron asked the baker imperiously.

“About fifteen kilometers back to the south,” he said, pointing in the direction of the Death Eaters.

“Small as this?”

“No, no maybe two or three times the size of our village.” Hermione and Ron exchanged glances one last time. He reached through the crowd and pulled the woman with the two small children up first.

“Give me the children,” Hermione said gently, holding out her arms. The toddlers recoiled into the folds of fabric, and whimpered softly. She locked eyes with their mother. “Tell them to come with me.”

“Where are you – ”

“There’s no time! They’ll be perfectly safe, I assure you.” The woman moved to disentangle her children’s grasping hands, as their cries became louder. Ron moved toward the mouth of the alley anxiously. Hermione knelt to pick them up, fighting their flailing bodies, as they strove to reach for their mother, who was tearfully trying to reassure them that everything would be fine. “Bring their mother next,” Hermione barked at Ron. “I can’t leave them there alone.”

“Can you manage it?” Ron asked, and Hermione knew that he was not talking about the children. She met his eyes for an instant and swallowed, but nodded. Apparating a specific distance away, rather than to an actual set of coordinates was not necessarily more difficult, but was something that she had not attempted recently. She mentally concentrated on fourteen kilometers to the south, just to make sure

that she didn't Apparate herself and the children into someone's parlor wall, and gripped the children to her tightly, as she blinked away.

The children's wailing was siren-like in her ears, as they reappeared in on top of a rolling hillock. Twinkling below them she could see the lights of a substantial town, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She could feel warm wet tears from the sobbing two-year-old soaking her neck, and she leaned her head down on top of his.

"Shhh," she soothed. "Your mum will be along in just a moment." At her words, there was a rush of air rather than a crack, and Hermione knew that Ron had just followed her medallion. He had one arm around the mother's waist. Hermione met his eyes, nodded once, and vanished again, going back for another group.

Hermione bounced on the balls of her feet in the alley, waiting for Harry. Ron had taken the baker, who insisted on staying until everyone had gone, and now the area behind the trash bins was empty. She quickly cast a Disillusionment charm on herself, as there were cracks of Apparation very close by.

A voice said, "Incendio," and the bakery was engulfed in flames almost instantly. Hermione began to slink toward the alleyway opening. She didn't want to Apparate within the town, not knowing the Death Eaters' exact positions, although she blessed whatever foolhardiness or arrogance had stopped them from erecting anti-Apparation wards. She guessed that they had wanted to Apparate around, "like lightning", in order to engender more fear in the Muggles they were murdering.

"The last few buildings 'ave been completely empty," she heard someone say.

"You think they've been tipped off?" said another voice.

"They can't 'ave gone far," the first one said with confidence. "We'll find 'em. You know what 'e said...nobody's to be left alive."

Then there was a commotion, with both Death Eaters making startled noises. Worried that they had somehow detected her presence, Hermione backpedaled, crouching once again in the shadows of the bins. The heat was almost unbearable, and she jerked backwards instinctively, bringing her elbow into contact with the bin with a resounding clang.

“What the bloody ‘ell was that?” cried the first voice, and then she saw his shadow fall across the alley. Hermione raised her wand, every single nerve ending in her body alert and poised for action. The instant his cloaked form was visible around the leading edge of the wall, she felled him with a non-verbal Stupefy to the head.

She held her breath without realizing it, waiting for what was to come next, but the second Death Eater never crossed in front of the alley.

“Reducto! We got wizards here! We got wizards here!” he said in a deafening voice, raising the alarm, as he Apparated away. She could hear his voice more faintly, as he warned his companions. Then the implication of the reductor curse reached her consciousness, as the flaming bakery toppled towards the alley. Even as the structure began to fall, she felt a sudden surge of energy flow through her, and the eerie lighting around the town snapped and flickered slightly. Anti-Apparation wards. Ron would not be coming back.

Hermione hesitated for only a fraction of a second, before plunging toward the main street. She could not stay there by the trash bins, and she would not leave without Harry. Sparks and chunks of flaming debris rained down around her.

A swath of burning fabric draped across the junction of her neck and shoulder, searing her, burning her hands as well, when she shrieked and attempted to bat it away. She dropped her wand in the effort, and was in the process of Summoning it back to her, when she felt a large piece of timber strike her in the back, knocking her onto her face in the mud from the recent rain, and sending blinding pain slicing through her. Her head was swimming, her hands throbbed, and she smelled charred flesh.

Oh, God, Harry...she thought desperately, as she clung to consciousness with her fingernails. There were cries now, roars of fury from the Death Eaters, and they were coming closer. Her right arm was pinned at her side, and she reached round blindly, struggling for her wand.

“Accio...” she croaked. Black spots appeared in front of her vision. The pain was becoming all-encompassing.

“Wingardium Leviosa,” came a quiet command from nowhere, in such a welcome voice that Hermione felt her eyes suffuse with tears. The painful, burning weight was lifted off her back, and then she felt a cloth hitting her, beating out any residual flames.

“They’re right behind me. Can you stand?” She wondered if she must be out of her head from her fall because she could hear the hysterical shrieking of a young infant. The air in front of her twitched and moved, and then Harry appeared, cradling a tiny baby in his arms. The baby’s blanket was now a blackened affair, discarded in the mud beside her. “Her mother dropped her out of a window to me. She – she didn’t – the house collapsed.” Hermione stood shakily, Accio’d her wand, grasping it gingerly between her fingers, and cast a Silencing spell on the baby. She still thrashed, red-faced and open-mouthed, but was not making a sound. They could now hear the thunder of footfalls on the roadway beyond the alley.

“Can you cast a Protego?” he asked anxiously.

“Harry, I’ve got my medallion. Let’s just go,” she said wearily, not sure how long she’d be able to remain standing.

“Please, just for a moment. There’s something I want to do.” His eyes were imploring with her to trust him, and then she followed his gaze upward. The glowing green of the Dark Mark hovered in the sky above the town.

“Protego,” she said, aiming at the entrance to the alley, not requiring any further answers. He glanced at her uncertainly, and she knew what he needed. She pushed as much of her magic toward him as she could, while still maintaining the Shielding spell.

“So that they may all know who was here tonight, who still has his magic, and who still fights Voldemort,” he said, and pointed his wand at the sky. Hermione thought that in his stance, still cradling the silently wailing baby, he looked like an avenging Angel.

“Lux Prevalet!” He cried, and a stream of white mist shot from his wand into the air, forming something in the sky. Even in her less than optimum state, Hermione could not keep a smile from playing across her lips.

Shining in the sky, in such a brilliant white that it all but eclipsed the Dark Mark, was a phoenix in flight, superimposed over a blazing bolt of lightning.

TBC

Well, this chapter just nearly wrote itself. I can't believe I finished it so quickly. I guess you can gather for yourselves that I rather liked it. I hope you do too, but don't expect all update to occur so quickly. It also got rather long, but I didn't want to leave too much of a cliff-hanger at the end.

“Lux Prevalet” means “The Light Prevails” and I quite shamelessly stole it from one of my other stories.

You may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Seventeen: Union

The resounding vibrato from hexes hitting the Protego shield brought Hermione out of her reverie, where she was standing motionless, eyes fixed on Harry's Mark. Her magic surged back toward her as Harry finished utilizing it, and the resulting sensations nearly overwhelmed her. She saw Harry's eyes flick anxiously from the Death Eaters – who seemed to have recovered from the sight much faster than they – to her, wobbling uncertainly in the mud. The Protego shield popped and sparked unevenly. One curse got in, whizzing just over their heads, narrowly missing them both.

She heard Harry swear under his breath.

"Come on, Hermione!" He was at her side then, an arm under her elbow catching her, even as she began to sink to her knees. Her head lolled; Harry sounded very far away, and a little breathless, as if he were having trouble keeping her upright. The baby, she thought vaguely, he's still got the baby. "Think about Ron! Concentrate on Ron, and we'll be out of here." His back was to the attackers; he was trying to shield her and the baby should the Protego fail.

That's right...I have the medallion...Harry wouldn't be able to make his work without my help. It was so hot, and she wondered why, vaguely remembering how cold and dreary it had been earlier. Pain was skewering her from so many places that she couldn't localize them all.

"Ron," she said slowly, more as a declarative statement than a question.

"Yes!" She felt Harry seize on her word with enthusiasm. "Yes, Ron! Where is he? Can you concentrate? Hermione, love, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have made you help me – just a silly gesture anyway." Hermione looked up at him, sooty and bleeding from a cut over one eye, and shook her head ponderously. It suddenly felt very heavy, like it could easily detach from her neck the way a flower blossom is snapped from a stem. She could still see with her peripheral vision the residual glow from the shining pureness that was Harry's Mark; it was untainted by the lurid orange of the burning town.

“Not silly. Beautiful.” She squinted her eyes over Harry’s head, frowning. The Protego shield was winking in and out now. Harry had half-dragged her behind some smoldering debris, which provided a poor semblance of cover. The flames roared higher behind them. Rock and a hard place... the frying pan and the fire...she thought deliriously, and nearly laughed. Harry’s eyes were wide with panic that he was trying to conceal. The baby screamed without making a sound. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Ron...

They disappeared.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in a cool gray chamber. The pleasant temperature and smoke-free air was soothing, and somewhere, she thought she could hear the lapping of water. She inhaled a deep breath, and was vaguely surprised by the sudden stabbing pain in her side.

The burning building toppling toward her...

Harry’s calm voice, invisible beneath his father’s cloak, saying, “Wingardium Leviosa.”

The baby, screaming in mute helplessness, unable to understand why her world had suddenly fallen apart so spectacularly.

“Reducto! We’ve got wizards here! We’ve got wizards here!”

The memories flooded back to her, and she shot upright, spurred to a sitting position by a surge of panicked energy. She became aware of a throbbing pain in both hands at about the same time her wild gaze met the reproving one of Madam Pomfrey.

“Madam – what – how – ?” she sputtered, as the older woman came to her side and gently forced her to lay back on the cot.

“I’ll thank you not to undo everything I’ve just repaired, Miss Granger,” she said sharply, but her eyes were twinkling. She looked across the

chamber over the foot of Hermione's bed, and called out, "Yes, she's awake, so you can stop glowering at me like that. If you overwhelm her, I'll use a sticking charm to keep you in that chair next time."

A tired smile creased Hermione's face, when Ron's face popped into her field of vision, hovering anxiously. He reached for one of her hands almost automatically, but arrested the movement rather awkwardly. Hermione realized why when she looked down at her arms, swathed from knuckles to elbows in white bandages. Included in her field of vision was a similar wrapping affixed at the crook of her neck, covering her from collarbone to shoulder blade on the left side. Because of this, only her right arm was sheathed within the sleeve of the infirmary gown she was wearing. Her left arm merely extended from the neckline of the garment, leaving the corresponding sleeve empty and her shoulder bare. Ron's concerned gaze was fixed on her face, but she still felt oddly vulnerable and exposed. Where's Harry? she wondered, and her eyes tripped beyond Ron's shoulder, but if he noticed, he did not say.

"Thank Merlin, you're okay," Ron breathed, finally breaking the silence. She reached across her body for his hand, clasping as well as she could with her desensitized, bandaged fingers that wouldn't bend properly. He held them gingerly, as if afraid that they would disintegrate beneath his touch.

"You called the Order." Her voice was nearly accusing.

"Hermione, we had to," Ron defended. "We had this – this group of Muggles who were scared to death, and then when Harry came with the baby, and you – you – my field medicine is not that good."

"The baby!" she seized on that one phrase. "How is the baby? What did you do with her?" Where's Harry? The phrase was pounding in her head like a drumbeat, and yet she was hesitant to ask, afraid of what the answer might be. Surely he's all right, she thought, I got us out – we got out.

"The baby's grandmother got out – got out all right," he said hoarsely, clearing his throat. "And her – her dad worked the night shift in

another town – the one we took them to... so she's okay." Hermione smiled.

"Good." There was an awkward silence. She could hear the hushed murmur of voices echoing gently around the cavernous space, and still beneath all that, seemed to be a whispery rush of water. She raised limpid eyes up to Ron, pleading silently.

"Harry – erm – " He cleared his throat abruptly. "Harry stayed with Remus and Tonks. They were – they were going to talk with the villagers. And Harry – well, he wanted to come back with you, but after – when we knew you were going to be okay, he – he decided to stay and make sure the baby was, you know, taken care of." She smiled a little through misty eyes, though part of her couldn't help but be disappointed that he had not been at her side when she awakened. Securing the baby was such a very Harry thing to do.

Did you mean the part about the cottage? About children?

I meant that most of all.

So you want to – someday?

Only if you'll marry me first.

"What did they – what happened to the villagers?" Hermione asked, remembering the clump of frightened people behind the trash bins that they had magically transported away.

"They've all asked to be Obliviated," Ron answered grimly. Hermione felt tears prick her eyes. Here was a perfect opportunity for a bridge to be constructed between the Magical and Muggle worlds, and they couldn't handle it. Faced with the reality of what had happened to them, their neighbors, and their homes, they would rather forget the menacing laughs and the unexplainable behaviors of the Death Eaters. With Voldemort determined to blast away all the barriers, and then kill the Muggles behind them, she could not doubt that the situation might repeat itself innumerable times.

"I don't – I guess I can't blame them," she sighed tiredly. Her hands were throbbing in time with her pulse. "Sometimes I – sometimes I wish I could forget." She thought of Harry, his skin tinted green under the gleam of the dampening field, splattered with blood. She thought of the Death Eater, carelessly nudging Bill's body with his boot. She thought of Percy diving in front of his sister-in-law. She thought of Ron, hunched over in the cellar, strangled sobs escaping his throat, despite his best attempts to squelch them.

"Do you really?" came a new voice, a welcome voice that sent an upswelling tide of emotion surging through her. Tears were still swimming in her eyes, making Harry's raven hair ripple, as if under its own power. She reached for him, smiling, and he gently took her bandaged fingers in his own.

"No... not if it means forgetting this..." she whispered, and she could feel his feather-light kiss on her forehead. There was a rustle, and she saw Ron swiftly retreating from the bedside. She sighed, guilt lancing through her swiftly and accurately, piercing her to the heart. "I wish..." she said, and Harry replied,

"I know," before she could even voice her desire. He threaded his fingers into her snarled hair, and stroked it softly back away from her face. "Hurting him is the last thing I want to do. But he's a Weasley, and they're made of pretty strong stuff. I think he'll be okay."

"I don't know." The words were out of her mouth before she could call them back, and she frowned, thinking of the raspy sobs that filled his parents' cellar. "You didn't hear –" She stopped, realizing that Harry was probably the last person to whom Ron would want that related. "I just want him to be happy...some day, when all this is over," she finished lamely.

"I want him to be happy just as much as you do," Harry said. "But I also want you to be happy. If I thought you'd be happy with him, I – you – you'd have my blessing." He breathed a deep, shuddering sigh, as if even the thought pained him. She shook her head mutely, reaching up to cup his cheek, unable to feel the smooth skin because of the bandages that swathed her hand, with a healing, anesthetic cream underneath, she was sure.

"I wouldn't be," she whispered. "I love Ron...so very much, but you – this – us... it – it consumes me, Harry, fills every part of me... I can't imagine ever giving that up. It makes every storybook romance I've ever read pale in comparison – like weak imitations of this real thing. And I can tell you with absolute certainty that I'll love you until the day that I die." He had closed his eyes toward the end of her speech, and she knew he was calling himself ten kinds of a fool, thinking himself unworthy of such a degree of emotion. "Don't do that," she intoned quietly, and by the way he started, unbending his head to look back in her eyes, she knew she'd been right.

"Don't do what?" he asked her guardedly, even though he knew the answer, and knew she knew.

"Pull away from me. Think you're not good enough. Are we going to go through this every time anything bad happens?"

"No," Harry answered shakily. "Just anytime something bad happens to you." The hand that she'd laid alongside his jawline, now slid around behind his neck, pulling with gentle strength, until he had bent over quite close to her.

"I love you, Harry Potter. Nothing – no one – can ever change that or take it away." His forehead was pressed to hers, and she was stunned by the amount of emotion swirling in his too-close green eyes.

"I know," he admitted in a barely audible voice.

"Good," she replied, infusing a saucy kind of smirk to her voice that made the corners of his eyes crinkle in an inward smile. He kissed her lightly on the mouth, as she smoothed down the sheets with the linen-shrouded palms of her hands. "So you got the baby taken care of?" she asked in a casual tone, so that he would understand the previous subject to have been dealt with and dropped.

"Yes, we went with her grandmother to find her father...he was working in a plant, and – and we took her to him." His eyes glinted, and Hermione felt sure that there were things he was not telling her.

She gazed at him calmly, silently willing him to tell her what was burdening him. He sighed. "He – I – I had to tell him what – what had happened to his ... wife." He almost got the word out without choking on it, but ended up nearly forcing it between clenched teeth. "He and his mum just – just held the baby and cried... cried like it was going to rip them apart." His eyes were shining with tears now, and he had shoved both hands deep into his pockets. He seemed to be nearly talking to himself, and Hermione let him talk. "They were – they were going to be celebrating their fifth anniversary in a couple of weeks. Charlotte was their first child – he said she'd wanted three." One hand escaped the confines of his pocket, and raked through his hair. "And then, he – he thanked me. God, Hermione, he stood there holding his – his motherless child, and he told me thank you." He looked almost nauseated, as if the gratitude of a heart-broken father was too much for him to comprehend. Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but he stopped her. "He said – he said it was what – what L – Lily would have wanted."

"What?" The word came almost soundlessly out of Hermione's mouth.

"Her name was Lillian – she – she – " He couldn't finish, and she pulled his head down again, cradling it on her shoulder. Another Lily had made the ultimate sacrifice for her baby, she thought. Harry wasn't really crying, but just trembling from fatigue and overwhelming emotion, and she shushed him like one would soothe an infant.

"Your mother would be very proud of you," she whispered, running her fingers gently through his hair.

"I'm sorry you got hurt," he said thickly. She did not even blink at the sudden subject change.

"I'm not," she replied evenly. "They would've all died if we hadn't been there. I can never regret that." He lifted his head then, and looked at her, looking pale and worn and somehow ethereally beautiful, like fragile bone china.

"I love you," he repeated again, leaning his cheek against hers.

"I love you too," she replied, feeling her eyelids flutter shut, even as her lips moved in their declaration.

Hermione awakened an indeterminate amount of time later to a pressure on her injured shoulder that was rapidly becoming painful. She shifted slightly, grunting at the sudden movement, and the pressure suddenly lifted with an oath.

"Merlin, Hermione, I'm sorry," Harry said, pushing his fingers under his glasses and scrubbing at his bleary eyes.

"Next time, you should fall asleep on the other side," she said, smiling tiredly.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, his brow wrinkling in concern.

"Yes, Hermione, you've an entire Order of people who've been waiting to speak to you. It has been awhile, you know." The electric blue head of a grinning Tonks appeared over the edge of the foot of her bed, as the Auror approached.

"I think I could get up?" Hermione phrased this as a delicate question, as she noted the watchful gaze of Madam Pomfrey nearby. The mediwitch gave a slow nod.

"Your ribs are probably fine, though they may still be tender. Take care not to open the wounds on your hands, please." At Madam Pomfrey's admonition, Hermione guiltily removed her hands from where she'd planted them on the mattress, intent on pushing herself into a sitting position. Instead, Harry and Remus flanked her bed, and lifted her up by her elbows, Harry propping her gently on pillows as proficiently as any nurse could have done.

"Hi, Professor Lupin," she said cheerfully, and nearly laughed when Remus rolled his eyes at her use of his erstwhile title. He was looking rather pale and haggard, half-healed scratches showing from the collar of his robes, and she remembered that the full moon had been only a couple of nights previously.

Fleur and Luna approached tentatively, as if they did not want to intrude, but Hermione greeted them with a beaming smile, wondering

a little at her own expansive mood. Perhaps it was Harry's tenderness and obvious concern for her; perhaps it was the elated relief at surviving a harrowing experience; perhaps it was residual elation for a good deed well done; or perhaps it was exultation at Harry's courageous and utterly astounding display of defiance in the night skies over the ruined village. She noted Fleur's hand, absently placed over her abdomen, though she was still not yet truly showing, and thought of the baby they'd saved and her shattered, young family. Her eyes clouded briefly.

"It is good to have you – all of you – " Fleur's lilting accent fell easily on Hermione's ears, as the Frenchwoman's gaze swept to include Harry and a newly-arrived Ron, standing beyond Lupin " – back, Hermione."

"It's good to be back," Hermione said sincerely, meaning every word. "You're our family, you know." Her eyes flitted around the gray chamber that she could now see looked like a cavern, enhanced with magically placed dividers and all the conveniences. It looked like the dividers could be made transparent or opaque at will, or caused to vanish altogether. There was a black divider all by itself in a far corner of the cave. She still thought she could hear a distant lapping of water. "Where exactly are we?"

To her surprise, Harry and Remus exchanged an almost gleeful look, like Weasley twins or Marauders of yore, sharing in a particularly hilarious practical joke. Her gaze tripped back and forth between the two of them, obvious questions dancing in her eyes.

"It's really brilliant, Hermione," Harry said, reassuring her.

"Better than anyone could have hoped for, even if they'd planned it," Fred put in, poking his head over his dad's shoulder, and grinning at her.

"Planned it... planned what?" Hermione was shaking her head in bewilderment. "It looks like a cave," she said off-handedly, as if to say, and what's so important about that?

"It's not what it is, Hermione," Ron finally put in. "It's where it is."

"Where?" Hermione echoed, and then looked round at the lot of them, impatiently. "Will someone just tell me?"

"We're on Hogwarts' grounds, Hermione," Harry put in, and something almost indefinable glinted in his green eyes. It was not wistfulness or nostalgia, but rather something determined. It was as if he were saying, The second war began here, and so it will end here. She suddenly remembered the watery sound she'd heard, and looked at Harry with sudden comprehension.

"We're underneath the Lake, aren't we?" Most of the Order members nodded, and Remus spoke up again.

"Sirius and James spent a lot of time prowling around the grounds; they were always on the hunt for new and undiscovered ways to sneak around school. There was a passage that ran under the Lake from the dungeons, but it was caved in and filled with water. They tried for over a year to find the place where the tunnel came out, but never did. They found this place instead."

"Entirely too poetic, isn't it?" came a cheerful voice. "Voldemort would be mad as hops if he found out." Hermione turned to see a radiant Ginny Weasley, approaching the bed, flanked by, but not touching a watchful Penelope Clearwater.

"Which is why it would be ideal for him not to find out. Ruddy girl has been entirely too cheeky since she snapped out of it," Fred said irreverently, chucking a thumb at his sister, and speaking in a conspiratorial tone to Hermione. "Saying Voldemort's name, smiling all the time... as if there were anything at all to smile about," he snorted, but it was evident to everyone there that Ginny's healing and subsequent outlook was as healing balm to his wounded soul.

Hermione suddenly looked at Harry and Ron, who both nodded subtly and knowingly. Ginny...she'll have to be told about Malfoy. Ron's face seemed suddenly pinched and pale.

“How – how do you get in? Without being seen?” Hermione stammered only slightly as she began, trying to keep her troubled gaze off of the equally troubled gazes of her two best friends, all of them trying not to think of Draco’s bloody body tumbling to the ground in the Potters’ back garden. “After all, you can’t – ”

“ – Apparate on Hogwarts’ grounds,” she finished, in chorus with both Harry and Ron. She speared them both with a glower, as Ginny and Fred in particular chortled.

“On the far end, the Lake butts up against a couple of sheer rock walls,” Remus said. “Behind the walls, almost completely enclosed by trees and out of sight of the castle, is a small pond. Above the water, there’s barely a hairsbreadth between the rocks, but below the surface, it widens out.”

“We can Apparate into the lagoon, swim under the walls, and be in the main body of the Lake,” Fred cut in. “The entrance to the cave is almost directly opposite Hogwarts, but accessible only through an underwater tunnel.”

“And – and the Squid?” Hermione said, striving for nonchalance, trying not to think about the fact that she had been brought into the cave in that exact way, while unconscious.

“Apparently, it’s on our side,” Harry told her, squeezing her hand gently in response to her look of trepidation. He knew that she’d never felt completely comfortable around that much water after the Second Task. “So are the merpeople.”

“What better guardians could you ask for?” Tonks said rhetorically. “Even if the Death Eaters found out we were here, it’d be terribly difficult for them to gain access.”

“It’ll be a good place for staging too. When the time comes,” Mr. Weasley put in. Hermione looked up at him sharply, and her eyes drifted to Harry, as if by their own volition. When the time comes.

Somehow she knew it wouldn’t be long now.

“What’s that over there?” she asked, in the ensuing silence, pointing toward the blackened divider. Most of the others were either clear or a foggy gray, like frosted glass. The people encircling her bed exchanged uncomfortable looks. Remus finally replied,

“That’s where we’re keeping the clone of Neville Longbottom.”

The cave was large, and Hermione squinted her eyes slightly to look at Harry, Remus, Fred, Ron, and Mr. Weasley hunched around a table, in what had unquestionably become the War Room. Tonks was at a bookshelf, clearly searching for one tome in particular. She saw Ron detach himself from the knot, and walk a few paces away to rummage in his knapsack. He cursed, flung a glance over his shoulder, and dove back into the depths of his pack with renewed frenzy.

Hermione’s curiosity was piqued, and she swung her legs over the edge of the bed, carefully planting her feet on the floor. She eyed her surroundings cautiously, but Madam Pomfrey was nowhere in sight. A battered pair of jeans and a mended shirt lay across the chair that Harry had slept in. Hermione recognized the clothes as the ones that she’d worn in the village. She darkened the divider, and quickly dressed, pulling the clothing gingerly over the parts of her that were bandaged.

By the time she had dressed, and stepped through the divider, which was charmed to turn membranous when someone desired entrance or exit – except, she assumed, in cases like Neville’s – Ron was cursing more fluently, and had garnered the attention of the rest of the group in the War Room. Tonks had abandoned her quest at the bookshelf, and was watching him curiously.

“What’re you on about, Ron?” Fred asked, though he still looked more amused than concerned.

“The map! The Marauder’s Map! I still had it, but now it’s – ”

“In that tree just outside the village,” Hermione finished for him, making a little self-conscious wave with her hand, as all eyes turned to her.

"You shouldn't be up yet," Harry said, coming to her side.

"Harry, I'm fine," she said, guiltily removing one bandaged hand from where it had been placed to brace against her still-tender ribs.

"I'm convinced," he said, deadpan.

"Well, I guess I'd better go get our things," Ron said, slapping his hands on his knees, and unfolding his lanky form from where it had been hunched over his bag. He was muttering something that included the words can't believe we forgot and what happens when Hermione is out of commission. Hermione grinned.

"Let me go," Harry said quickly, almost urgently, causing his girlfriend to look at him oddly. "I need to – I need to see how effective my magic has gotten anyway." Ron slanted him a measured look. "Hermione can come with me."

Now it was her turn to stare at Harry in befuddlement. He seemed to be trying to tell Remus to do something without speaking.

"You just said she shouldn't be out of bed," Ron said, in a somewhat accusing tone. "And now you're going to let her swim in a lake?"

"I was going to swim out, and let her follow with the medallion," Harry said stiffly, and Hermione wondered at the sudden tension that had sprung up between the two of them; it was just what she hoped that the seriousness of their situation would have continued to forestall.

"To retrieve a couple of trunks?" Ron's tone was scathing. "She had a burning building bloody well fall on her."

"I know that, Ron," Harry bit out. "I was there!" The implication, of course, being that Ron wasn't. The redhead froze, as if Stunned by Harry's words, but he recovered quickly.

"And you couldn't do anything to stop it, could you?" he said softly. "What makes you think you could protect her now? Being around you

is bloody well going to get her killed, and you -- you couldn't even take care of yourself when Vo – Voldemort – ”

“Ron, that's enough!” Hermione's voice rapped out sharply in the tension, surprising herself, her two friends, and the rapt audience. “I'll go with Harry and we'll get the trunks. We'll be back in ten minutes.” Harry's face was inscrutable, like an ancient ritual mask carved from stone.

“Ron,” Remus intervened. “Why don't you have another look at this sketch? See if I've got the layout right? You've been at Hogwarts far more recently than I.” Ron was still eying the pair of them a little sullenly, but he moved to Lupin's side, having little choice to do anything else.

“Give me five minutes,” Harry whispered, his breath fanning against her ear. “You don't want to end up in the middle of the Lake as well.” He made his way around a curve of the cavern wall, out of her sight, and she heard the ever-present lapping of the water gurgle and slap at the rock more loudly as he disturbed it.

She took a deep breath, trying to ignore the dull, irritating ache in her side, and began to count to herself, one-one thousand, two-one thousand...

“So,” she said conversationally, as they clambered hand in hand up the small rise where the gnarled old tree squatted, having Apparated into the cover of a copse of trees to make sure the area was secure. “What was that all about?” Nonchalantly, she cast another Drying charm on Harry, as there were a few damp spots in his clothing and hair that he'd missed on his attempt.

“What was what all about?” he offered up lamely, in a sort of token protest. She gave him a withering look that said, Don't even try that with me.

“What is in your trunk that you want to get at so badly? And why did I have to come with you? And what does Remus know about it?” She said, and watched as surprise flitted across his face, followed by resignation.

"After what Ron said – " he began, and stopped abruptly, as they arrived at the tree. He used his wand to take the charms off of the hole, and reached in to remove their shrunken belongings. He shook his head tiredly. "He was probably right anyway. I can't keep you safe, and it was a stupid – " He enlarged his trunk, and knelt down to rifle through its contents. Hermione leaned against the tree, keeping an eye out for any movement that could possibly be unfriendly.

"If it was a stupid idea, why are you still looking for whatever it is?" she asked him, crooking one sardonic eyebrow at him.

"Because I'll regret it forever if I don't," he said simply, looking up at her briefly through his dark lashes, and then resuming his search. He stopped suddenly, as he evidently found the object for which he'd been looking, and triumphantly came up with a small, flat box. He popped it open with his thumbs, and proffered it to her, still kneeling. Inside, nestled in navy velvet were three rings. Hermione's eyes drifted to the rings, back to Harry, and then down to the rings again. "My ... erm – proposal earlier wasn't very romantic or elegant at all, but I did mean it," he began haltingly.

Only if you marry me first.

Okay.

"I've – I've been thinking about it for quite awhile, actually. Got Tonks to get this out of my vault for me, before we left the Order. I've been carrying it around all this time, but we've – we've never been – I couldn't seem to find the right – " He faltered a little, and reached up the hand that was not holding the box to push his glasses back into place on the bridge of his nose. "Oh, sod it!" he said, and Hermione bit her lower lip to keep from giggling. She was as girly as the next female her age, though she often strove to hide it – or ignore it completely – and she had long envisioned a perfect, romantic, flowery proposal, on a moonlit beach, or somewhere sodden with candles and flowers, or whatever cliché happened to fit her mood at any given moment. This was not a romantic cliché in the least, but he was so darling kneeling there, holding the box, with what she assumed were his parents' rings inside, and he seemed so terribly

awkward and nervous, as if she hadn't made it abundantly clear how she felt about him, and... He looked up at her beseechingly, and she hoped that her eyes looked suitably solemn, as he appeared to collect himself.

"I love you, Hermione. I meant what I said before, and – and – you said once that I gave you hope for the future, even now, and I was hoping that we could get started – on our future together... I know even being around me is dangerous, and I don't know how much – but whatever is left, I – " he looked at her and sighed, finally opting for the straightforward approach. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you." She understood what he'd been trying to get across, and what he had not said. However long or short that is.

His direct gaze befuddled her – this almost painfully earnest Harry made her lashes flutter down to her cheeks, which stained a becoming rosy shade. But even as she could hear her racing pulse pound in her ears, she knew that there was no doubt as to her answer. Slowly, she extended her left hand down to him, fingers splayed, wishing idiotically that her hands weren't drowning in bulky bandages.

"There's nothing I want more..." she began slowly, knowing that mere words could never express the elation that filled her like a rising tide. He started to ease it over her wrapped ring finger, but said apologetically,

"I don't know if it's going to fit."

"Bloody sodding hell," came a new voice that made Hermione jump and both of them reach for their wands. Ron had materialized, zeroing in on their medallions, no doubt, only a couple of meters away. Instantly, the completed tableau imprinted itself on Hermione's mind, as Ron must have seen it: Harry kneeling in the dirt next to his opened trunk, in the process of placing a ring on the finger of a blushing Hermione.

Harry looked up at her, and the sight of her stricken face seemed to inexplicably make him angry. He used a low, spindly limb protruding from the tree trunk to pull himself up to a standing position.

“Is this the way it’s always going to be?” He directed the question at the two of them. “Are you always going to be looking at us like we’ve hit you with a bludger? Are you always going to feel guilty for loving me back?” His voice was low and angry, and it hit her like hammer blows.

“Harry, I’m not – ” she hastened to say. It was like the conversation they’d had in the cellar at Godric’s Hollow – only worse, since Harry was even more clearly fed up. He didn’t let her finish, but addressed Ron.

“I love Hermione more than my own life,” he said succinctly, his directness causing Ron to flinch. “I’ve asked her to marry me, and she’s said yes. I’d like to do it as soon as possible – ” Here, he darted a questioning glance at Hermione, who nodded, a little hesitantly. “I’d like your blessing, Ron – and I’d – I’d like you to stand up with me, if that’s at all possible.” His eyes flicked from Ron, standing in uncomfortable silence, to Hermione, who was absently twiddling her ring around the middle knuckle of her finger. The bandages prevented it from sliding any further down. “We are going to make a life together. We – we’re trusting that we’ll come through this, and – and when it’s all over, and Voldemort is dead, we’re going to live – really live.” He paused and searched Ron’s face for a long moment. “And we want you to be a part of it. But – but you’re going to have to accept it – accept us. After the cabin – after you gave us the – the bedroom, I thought you had started to come to terms with it.”

Ron put his hands in his pockets, hunching awkwardly, and scuffing the toe of one trainer in the dirt. The tension seemed to make the air around them too thick to properly breathe. Hermione watched Ron with bated breath and pleading eyes; the future of the Trio depended on his response.

“Merlin’s Beard, Harry,” he began slowly. “I – sometimes I think I’ve got it all sorted, and – and then it – it rears up and bites me in the arse again. When you – ” he looked at Hermione, “When Harry brought you from the village, you were kind of slung over his shoulder, unconscious, and he could barely stand up. I – I’ve – I was so scared – afraid you were dead, and I didn’t know if I’d be able to handle it.”

Hermione's eyes were filmed over with a sheen of tears. Not you too, she could practically hear him thinking. "But I knew – that whatever I was feeling, that Harry was feeling about a hundred times that, and –" He shook his head, obviously at a loss. "I'm not going to lie and say this is easy, but – but I'm working on it, and – and – well, seeing that," he gestured toward the ring, still awkwardly positioned on Hermione's hand, "was rather a nasty knock, but – but, at the end of the day, nothing's going to – I've tried to tell myself that I don't care what happens to you, but I can't – you're still both my best mates, and – and –" he took a deep breath, "– and if you can't be in love with me, then I guess I'd rather you love him, than anyone else."

"Ron –" Hermione choked out in a broken whisper, and flung herself into his arms. She hugged him as tightly as her ribs could stand, hoping to let him know by touch alone how important he was – and would always be – to both of them. She couldn't see what expression was on his face, but she heard Harry's voice say dryly,

"Try not to look like you're enjoying it so much right in front of me, Ron, thanks." She pulled away from Ron with a sort of uncertain horror, but there was a barely detectable twinkle in Harry's eye, and Ron's face was bright crimson.

"Harry!" she chided, half-laughing, and the tension draped over the three of them seemed to ease a little, no longer oppressively choking the atmosphere. Ron opened his mouth, hesitated infinitesimally, and extended his hand to Harry.

"I'd be honored to stand up with you," he said, sounding oddly formal. Harry pressed his lips together tightly, and nodded once, shaking his best mate's hand firmly. He shrunk his trunk again – his wand seemed to be obeying his commands with new alacrity – and they situated their recovered belongings for the return trip.

"Let's go get married," Harry said casually, causing Hermione to look at him with open-mouthed surprise.

"What? Now?" she gaped. He gripped her hand, and smiled – one of the rare, genuine, eye-sparkling ones, all the more adored because of

their scarcity – lifting her injured hand to his lips and kissing the wrapped palm gently.

“Why not?” he asked cheekily, but then his face fell, and he added, “I mean, if you’re up for it... but you’ve probably already done too much today, and Pomfrey’s going to kill me for dragging you out here, and –” Hermione cut him off by pressing one fingertip to his lips.

“I’m perfectly fine, Harry, and I’ll marry you whenever you like,” she said demurely. He caught her up to him with a low growl, and said,

“If I had known that, we’d have been married months ago.” His eyes were so tender that she felt her insides melt into a gelatinous mass, and she threaded her bandaged hands clumsily through his hair. The corners of her eyes crinkled as she gazed at him.

Why not, indeed?

Hermione wondered dizzily if war weddings had always been like this. Their announcement upon their arrival back at the cave had frozen the Order into surprised stillness and silence for about two seconds; then they had been galvanized into action by Fleur Weasley. Not a few glances had been worriedly cast at Ron, who had his game face on, and was trying vainly to look completely unconcerned by the ruckus. She had seen Remus give Harry an approving nod, a glint of something like fatherly pride gleaming in his eyes. Remus had known... how long had Harry been pondering this?

Fleur had immediately herded the younger female members of the Order – Professor McGonagall had the authority to conduct wedding, as the Headmistress of Hogwarts, and was going over the ceremony with Harry and Remus – into one of the sleeping quarters, darkening some of the outer walls and vanishing several of the intervening dividers so that one larger room was formed.

“Now,” Fleur said, clapping her hands together briskly. “unfortunately, we have no magazines, but if you can tell me what you want your gown to look like, perhaps we can come close.”

“Fleur, this is – I mean, it’s just me and Harry, and neither of us want a big deal. I – I’m fine with my regular robes, and – anyway, it’s the marriage that’s important, not the wedding.”

“Nonsense,” Fleur said, as crisply and efficiently as any Englishwoman, despite her musical accent. “We are witches, are we not? We can do this. Let us make your wedding beautiful.”

“Do let us,” Penelope pleaded shyly, placing one hand on Hermione’s arm, looking amazed at her own daring. “It – it’s something to look forward to... something positive, a – a – ”

“A symbol,” Ginny spoke up quietly, from where she had taken a seat on one of the beds. Hermione turned to look at her for a moment, and saw the understanding in those unseeing eyes. Yes, Ginny, above all other people, would know the significance of that word. Marriage would be a life-affirming act of hope for anyone, but for Harry – and for her, by extension – it once again turned him into a symbol. She bit her lips together, considering, while the other women watched her hopefully. Harry’s been a symbol all his life – I suppose one more time wouldn’t make much difference...especially if it’s good for morale.

“All right, if it’s okay with Harry,” she said, trying not to sound terribly reluctant. There was much squealing and clapping of hands then...even from Tonks. Hermione could only imagine what the other Order members thought of the din.

“Fleur already asked him! He said to make sure it was okay with you,” Penelope said, laughing.

“Dress, hair, makeup, flowers...” Fleur was ticking things off on her fingers. “What kind of flowers do you want to carry? Roses are traditional, I think, or...”

“Lilies,” Hermione blurted quickly. “Just...lilies, I think. Two to carry ... and one in my hair?” She raised her eyebrows questioningly at Fleur, who looked at her for an emotionally charged moment, and nodded her approval.

“We ought to have a runner... or a canopy, or something,” Tonks put in. “Something that will liven up this place, since it’s mostly... gray.”

“Candles too... or plants,” Penelope added. “And I’ve got a lovely little charm that will do birds. We could have doves or – ”

“No birds!” Hermione said emphatically, shaking her head rapidly. She thought she heard Ginny muffle a snort.

They set to work, Fleur and Penelope working on Hermione herself, while Tonks and Luna exited the bridal area to begin work on the decorations, under strict instructions from Fleur. Hermione couldn’t even imagine what Tonks and Luna would have come up with on their own. They had gotten Ginny started on transfiguring bedsheets into swaths of a rich, yellow material for the runner and what Hermione assumed would be a sort of awning. Once Ginny had been assured of the correct width and color, the rest was easy for her to accomplish.

Fleur was muttering some French imprecations about her hair, while Ginny swept her wand back and forth, yellow billows piling on the floor about her feet. Hermione felt as if this were happening to someone else entirely.

She was getting married.

“If only I had some Sleakeasy’s,” Fleur sighed. “Of course, when I was snatched off the streets, no one had the decency to bring along any of my toiletries.” She rolled her eyes in resignation. Hermione paused to consider that for a moment; she had never realized that she – and the others who had already been holed up at the Shop – had most of her things, while those like Penelope and Luna and Fleur came with scarcely more than the clothes on their backs.

“I have some... in my trunk,” Hermione offered up hesitantly. “I haven’t used it since graduation.”

“What about makeup? Or jewelry – although we can transfigure you some if you need it,” Fleur’s eyes lit up, as she thought of other possibilities that were opened to her. Hermione shook her head.

"I don't wear makeup much – or jewelry. I might have a little..." she said in a hesitant voice.

"I've got a little makeup," Ginny offered, adding, "I'll bet Tonks does too. And as for jewelry, why not see what else Harry has in that family vault of his?"

"That's brilliant, Ginny, of course!" Hermione breathed, as Fleur herded Penelope out of the curtained area, with a parting admonition for Hermione to stay there.

There was silence, broken only by the soft whisper of the billowing fabric that Ginny was creating. It grew odd and heavy, and Hermione tried to dispel it by muttering the charm that would turn her old school robes from black to white.

"Albeo," she said, looking critically down at her robes. They were white, but still shapeless, carrying the heavy cowl and pointed sleeves that she had added to make them look more the apparel of choice for Death Eaters. "Damn," she muttered, clumsily knuckling one eye. "I really don't know what I'm doing."

After a moment of thought, she pointed her wand at one of the curtains, and said,

"Speculum," turning a portion of the frosted gray divider into a full-length mirrored surface. She could see herself reflected therein, as well as Ginny, where she was seated on the bed. The younger girl was no longer transfiguring cloth, but held her wand limply in her hand, and was gazing in Hermione's direction. Hermione found it rather disquieting.

"Ginny, are you okay?" she said, tentatively, waving her wand and making the sleeves of her robes disappear entirely.

"Absolutely. Why wouldn't I be?" Ginny said airily, resuming her wand movement. Swish went the fabric in graceful folds to the floor.

"I mean – we've all been worried about how Ron's going to take this, but – but nobody's checked with you. I just -- I just wondered if you were okay with it." Hermione watched Ginny carefully in the mirror, as she added sheer, cap sleeves and shrank her robes more closely around her body. She studied the effect in the mirror, and removed the sleeves again.

"Harry broke up with me a long time ago," Ginny said, after a momentary pause, phrasing her reply carefully.

"And you and I both know that time has bollocks to do with it," Hermione said coolly. Ginny seemed very far away, and Hermione wondered uncomfortably if she were thinking of that long ago day in the Gryffindor common room, where Harry had kissed Ginny, had chosen Ginny...

"Time may not have anything to do with how I do or do not feel, but how I do or do not feel has nothing to do with your wedding." Ginny had started out quietly, but her voice has risen rapidly with a quasi-hysterical note in it by the end. Hermione padded over to Ginny's side in her half-transfigured robes, and sat down next to her on the mattress.

"This is an uncomfortable and close environment that we're all forced to live in, for Merlin only knows how much longer. Neither Harry nor I want to make anyone uncomfortable." Ginny cocked her head quizzically at Hermione, her mannerisms still so much those of a seeing person, that Hermione sometimes had to remind herself that Ginny was blind.

"Harry is the savior of the wizarding world," Ginny said. "And you're the woman he loves more than anything else. I could tell – even before he realized it himself, by the way he searched for you as he entered a room, by the way he always wanted your opinions and your approval, by the way he clung to you, so much that – that even when he could dismiss me out of concern for my safety, he still had to have you by his side." She shrugged a little, but Hermione could see the pain reflecting in her eyes. "He thought he loved me once," she shook her head. "That doesn't even put me in the same class as you. And what kind of selfish prat does it make me, if I try to take away or ruin

the thing that he wants the most, the few moments of happiness that he's snatching for himself in a world that's gone to hell?" She turned towards Hermione, her gaze only slightly askew, and smiled a little wistfully. "Of course, I love Harry. Everybody does. He's got this – this endearing, protective nobility – where you know he'd do anything for you – and – how could you not love him, really?" She raised her shoulders. "But the issue isn't who loves Harry... it's whom Harry loves... and he loves you. He deserves you...he deserves this." She plucked at Hermione's robes with two fingers.

"I'm not sure how to say this without sounding condescending, but thank you, Ginny," Hermione murmured, laying her hand over the one that had touched her robes, and patting it softly.

"Well, with – with Mum gone, and Charlie and Bill and ... when you spent a month in a nightmare watching people you love die over and over again, then – then a little unrequited crush doesn't seem like a – like a huge thing to get angsty over, you know?" Ginny said. "Puts things in perspective a bit."

Hermione froze. The nightmare curse.

"Ginny, you might want to know – we – we found out who did that to you. We ran into them at Godric's Hollow. He – " Hermione blundered to a stop, as Ginny vehemently shook her head.

"I don't want to know. Not today," she spoke firmly, as Hermione tried to protest.

"Ginny, you deserve to know. This could help give you closure." She said this in her most cajoling voice, even though part of her was tremendously relieved that she would not have to be the one breaking the news to Ginny – at least not now. Ginny would not be dissuaded.

"Today is about you – you and Harry, not me. You can tell me later. It'll keep."

Luna's tiny Muggle radio was sitting up on one of the plant stands, obviously having had an Amplification charm cast on it. The magic seemed to be reacting badly to the electronics, and every now and then the soothing song of violins was interrupted by an untoward

crackle or hiss. Professor McGonagall was trying to put a Clarity charm on it, but that seemed to be making the problem worse. Hermione didn't really mind; she thought it sounded lovely. She was peering out through a small window in the opaque divider, to see swaths and folds of yellow fabric draped around the cavern, periodically festooned with cheerful bunches of flowers, and set off with sconces of elegant candles. A soft yellow runner led from the central part of the display to the very curtain behind which she now stood.

Fleur had returned just in time to keep her from completely destroying her robes in her flustered state, and the Frenchwoman had made them completely unrecognizable. Hermione almost couldn't believe that the breathtaking woman in the conjured mirror was really an accurate representation of her. Her hair had been tamed, swept up in a coronet of ringlets, with a single white lily tucked in the midst of the shining brown curls. She really was a community project: she was wearing drop earrings loaned to her by Penelope, a bracelet of Ginny's, and a diamond pendant that had belonged to Harry's mother. Then, of course, there was her ring.

She had begged Madam Pomfrey for permission to remove the bandages, but had changed her mind when she saw her mottled, pinky-red, still-healing skin. Instead, they had enlarged the ring, so that it fit over the white wrapping. She was barefoot, having enjoyed the cool feel of the cavern floor on her feet so much that she stopped Penelope in mid-transfiguration from turning her trainers into white satin slippers.

She looked down at the marquis-cut diamond in the antique setting, and watched it shimmer through her disbelieving tears.

It was almost time. Mr. Weasley had come out of another area of dividers, in the nicest robes he owned, and was headed her way. He had struggled for composure, Ginny had said, when she'd asked him if he would escort Hermione.

She shrunk back away from the divider window, when Harry and Ron emerged a moment later, both in the dress robes they'd worn to

graduation. Harry's appeared to be hanging on him loosely, and she watched as Remus dashed across the expanse and adjusted them magically.

"Severyone ready in here?" the gentle voice of Mr. Weasley called as he reached their room, and Hermione replied in the affirmative. She and Harry had both wanted Ron to stand up with them, but the rest of the Order was so small that it seemed silly and possibly insulting to select any more of a wedding party. It seemed that everyone felt an integral part of this, having dressed in their best, whether they had something, borrowed something, or transfigured something. Maybe Ginny was right, Hermione thought, as Fleur gently pressed the lilies into her sweaty hands, maybe everyone needs this...something positive...a symbol.

Mr. Weasley extended his arm to her, as Fleur and Penelope, smiling brilliantly, magicked the dividers away.

Afterward, Hermione would recall that she couldn't remember much of the ceremony. Professor McGonagall had presided, speaking in her crisp and familiar brogue, with something decidedly un-professorial glinting in her eyes. Harry had been pale, his fingers trembling in hers, but with the force of the emotion that he felt for her blazing so brightly from his green eyes that she thought it would physically buckle her knees. Ron's face had been carefully composed, but, as his father handed her off to Harry, he had met her eyes and dropped one lid in a subtle wink.

She heard her voice, high and shaky, but clear, reciting the vows that McGonagall read for her, as if she were listening to someone else. The words were ringing in the acoustics of the cave, but she could not recall what she'd said. She felt the cold weight of the wedding band slide over her finger to join the engagement band that had only recently taken up residence there. She felt Harry's calloused skin under the very tips of her fingers that were unbandaged, as she slid his ring home as well.

McGonagall was saying something else. She had her wand in her hand for the final incantation. Harry had his as well, and she saw Ron gripping his covertly, ready to come to his aid, if his magic proved

faulty or fickle. Remus's eyes were swimming with tears, as were Mr. Weasley's. Aberforth had a small, proud smile on his face, his blue eyes twinkling like a certain Headmaster they'd known and loved. Fleur had a vague smile on her face, but appeared to be somewhere else entirely. Her hand was rested on her abdomen, and Hermione guessed that she was at another wedding, one that had occurred in the back garden of a ramshackle home, not too much over one year previously. Luna had a whimsical look on her face, but her eyes, sharp and alert, instead of unfocused and dreamy as they usually were, fixed on Ron, rather than the couple getting married.

McGonagall was speaking again. She tapped her wand on their joined hands, and Hermione felt a pulse thrum through her like electric energy. Harry's gaze jerked up from their hands to meet hers in something like astonishment, and she felt the jolt again.

And then, he was tugging her toward him, gently clasping one bandaged hand, and then his other hand was around her waist. She thought she could feel the heat of his skin through the material of her robes.

There was a heartbeat of a moment, and his lips were on hers, yearning and passionate, and somewhere above the pounding drum riff of her pulse in her ears, she could hear the echoing sound of hearty applause.

They could not hear the murmur of voices from Order members that they knew were still awake, finishing off the rest of the butterbeer and Old Ogden's that Aberforth claimed to have found shrunken in his pocket after he awakened from his fever, evidently the last vintage to come out of the Hog's Head. A Silencio had been cast on the enlarged partition, just big enough to fit a magically enlarged bed.

Hermione lay in Harry's arms, staring at him, still having trouble believing that they were actually married at all, and feeling more than a little odd that everyone else in the cave knew exactly what they were doing now.

"I'm glad we did this," she murmured in a voice thick with sated repletion.

“Me too,” Harry said lightly, deliberately misunderstanding to what ‘this’ she’d been referring. While he chuckled, she hit him in the chest with her open hand, and her eyes fell on her bandages again. Harry’s followed suit.

“How are your hands healing up?” he asked, bringing one hand up to his lips, and kissing the fingertips and then the palm, linen wrappings notwithstanding. Hermione’s brow crinkled.

“They look horrible,” she admitted. “Madam Pomfrey said I could take the bandages off, but I – I didn’t want you to see them.” His eyes were tender, so tender that she thought perhaps she could die of love for him, and he reached up to move his recalcitrant fringe off of his forehead, revealing a familiar lightning-bolt shape.

“Hermione.” The way he said her name was a throaty vibration in his chest, and it did funny things to her stomach. “What makes you think I care anything at all about scars?” Tears sprang to her eyes, along with a sudden rush of understanding. Harry would probably bring more baggage to a marriage than anyone else she’d ever met. She lowered her eyes, and the white of the bandages against the flesh tone of his chest swam before her. He tilted her chin up, forcing her to look at him, and said, “I think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, Mrs. Potter. Burns on your arms are not going to change my opinion.”

A sob rattled out of her throat then, without her permission, at the use of her new name, and he looked at her with some alarm.

“This is about more than just your arms, Hermione. What’s going on?”

“I just – I – ” Her jaw trembled, and she felt herself headed for a meltdown. You thought Cho had a crying jag? You haven’t seen anything yet. “I can’t believe this – this has all happened. That I’m married. To you. I – I almost feel ashamed for being so happy, and – and, at the same time, I think of my mum and dad, or yours, or Sirius, or the Weasleys, and think how much they would’ve have wanted to be here for this day – how it should have been at Hogwarts, in the Great Hall – with Neville and Seamus and Dean and all our housemates, and – ” She sniffed loudly, and tried desperately to find

Practical Hermione, who seemed to have gone on holiday. “But then I think about how much I love you, and – and I – and I get greedy, and I’m glad I have you, no matter what else happened, and I want this for another hundred years – and I know – I know that – it’s not guaranteed.”

“It never is,” Harry said thoughtfully, reaching for the tail of the bandage, and unwinding it from around her arm. “But I know that I’ll never regret this – not for as long as I live.” She pulled her arm away from him.

“Harry, stop,” she said, but he ignored her, retrieving her arm, and divesting her of the protective covering. She flinched, wanting to shrink away from him, at the side of the marbly pink-white color, and the uneven texture to the skin. The cool air felt funny on her newly exposed skin. She averted her eyes, afraid to see his reaction.

He leaned down to kiss the fresh scars on the insides of her wrists, and she felt tingles run up her arms.

“I love you, Hermione. You’re my wife,” He rolled the unfamiliar word around in his mouth, seemingly in awe of it. “And you’ve never been lovelier. I’ve never wanted to live for something more in my entire life.” She bracketed his face with her hands, and pressed her forehead to his.

“Then do it...live,” she commanded softly, and he kissed her deeply and thoroughly. As she gave herself up to his kiss and his caress, she could not stop the tears – tears of joy, tears of loss, tears of fear, she wasn’t sure which – from leaking from the corners of her eyes and disappearing into her hair.

TBC

Okay, a little bit of a fluff-fest for you, but I couldn’t get rid of the angst entirely. More action should be in the next installment, and we’ll be finding out what the Order – as well as Voldemort -- has been doing all this time.

Hope you enjoyed it. You may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Chapter Eighteen: Lake

"Harry, you're going to have to help me here," Hermione said, her voice muffled under the fabric of her shirt. "I can't lift my arm enough to get it in the sleeve." There was no answer, and she said again, "Harry?" When the silence continued, she finally pulled the collar of the shirt down, and turned to look at him expectantly.

Harry was sitting on the edge of the bed, fully dressed, but shoeless, looking at her so mournfully that she wanted to cry. She knew instantly what was causing his black mood, having felt some of the same ambivalent feelings herself this morning.

"Harry..." she began, in the same benignly remonstrating tone she would have used if he'd put off an essay until the last minute.

"I don't want to go out there," he said, helplessly, as if confessing some deeply hidden secret.

"They gave us a day, Harry. That's eighteen hours longer than they probably should have given us," she said patiently, even while she understood exactly how he felt. They had awakened the morning after their wedding to find a tray, sitting on a small table, where it had been previously unnoticed. It was charmed to provide them with whatever food they requested, although it was working, by necessity, from a much more limited menu than Hogwarts. A note in Tonks' hand explained that they had the day to themselves.

They had not left the bed for the rest of it. At one point, Hermione had simply Summoned the tray over to them; when food had finally become a necessity, it provided only an unwelcome distraction from each other.

"It – it was ... incredible," Harry said softly. Hermione smiled wispily, and walked over to sit beside him on the bed, where he carefully lifted her shirt sleeve over her injured shoulder.

"What was?" she asked, in a hushed tone mirroring his, even though she thought she knew what he was going to say.

“Getting to pretend – to pretend that everything was normal, and that nothing in the world mattered, except for the fact that we’re in love and just got married,” he sighed. “I almost don’t want to face them – any of it – I just want to stay in here forever...with you.” He sounded so plaintive that she almost laughed, but stopped at the pained look in his eyes. She captured his face between her hands, and leaned toward him, gently capturing his lips with hers.

“That last part,” she whispered hoarsely, “the part where we’re in love and got married – that wasn’t pretend, Harry.” He closed his eyes for a moment, and seemed to be reveling in her touch.

“Thank God for that,” he said in a raspy voice, before winding his arms around her, and returning her kiss with a desperate kind of passion, the clinging of a drowning man to the only solid thing within his grasp, a sort of pleading for more and a just-in-case good-bye all rolled into one. Hermione felt the fire in his touch, and couldn’t tell where each of them separated into individuals. His hands slid up her back to cup her shoulders, and then she felt them fumbling at the two buttons on her shirt’s neckline.

Perhaps the outside world could wait a few minutes longer. When they emerged from their hideaway, fully dressed and loosely holding hands, the majority of the Order was clustered in the War Room. Remus was seated at a table speaking to someone through a two-way mirror. Tonks and Mr. Weasley hovered anxiously over his shoulders. In the infirmary where Hermione had initially awakened, Penelope and Madam Pomfrey were bent over a cauldron that steamed copiously and smelled foul. Ginny was sitting on the edge of the empty bed, talking to them.

“Fred will meet you in the usual place,” Lupin was saying, and Hermione saw the glow from the mirror dim as he tapped it with his wand and broke the connection. “Fred!” he called, getting that particular Weasley’s attention from a table in the corner, where he was busy with a myriad of unidentifiable components. “He’s ready. He’ll be there shortly.” Fred nodded a response, and got up, tucking his wand in his pocket. Without further exchanged, he headed for the entrance where the cavern met the lake.

Hermione and Harry exchanged bewildered glances.

“Who’s he meeting?” Harry asked. “Where is he going?”

“We were going to wait to brief all three of you together,” Tonks said, her lips thinned with a mixture of chagrin and annoyance. “But Ron –”
Hermione saw alarm flash in Harry’s eyes, and she said quickly,

“What’s happened to Ron?” Her voice sounded high and panicky.

“Old Ogden happened to Ron,” Tonks said dryly, and waited for the comprehension to flash across their faces. “Aberforth gave him the last bottle, which he seemed to think he needed last night.”

“He’s ... drunk?” Hermione managed to say.

“He’s sleeping it off,” Tonks corrected. “Arthur wanted to leave him with a monster of a hangover to deal with, but there’s too much to do. We need him functional.”

Hermione wasn’t sure whether she wanted to cry, apologize, or pummel Ron. He’s drunk. With all that’s going on...

It was a wedding.

That’s not why he got drunk.

That’s exactly why he got drunk.

Hermione flinched, and looked at Harry. She knew that he was thinking the same thing she was. The wedding ring felt heavy and unfamiliar on her left hand, and she flexed her fingers experimentally around it, while the bandages rustled with the movement. Harry felt her fidget, and squeezed her other hand, which was still clasped in his. He seemed to be giving her a warning look, as if to say, Too late now; you made your choice, and we’re married.

She shook her head at him. Don’t be silly. He squeezed her hand one more time, and winked at her as he moved away, drifting toward

Fleur and Aberforth, who had gotten involved in a fairly intense-looking discussion over by the well-traveled map of Great Britain.

She turned toward the infirmary, with the vague intention of having Madam Pomfrey look at her arms. The skin underneath the bandages was beginning to itch, and she was hoping that there was some kind of salve or potion to help reduce the scarring.

Ginny was walking toward them carefully, holding a steaming mug aloft, apparently counting the steps across the rather large chamber to the War Room.

"I've got it, Dad," she said, as she drew closer. "I can be the one to give it to him, if you'd like. If I end up pouring on his head, I can claim it was an accident."

"Ginny," Mr. Weasley chided. "He's – it's a bit difficult for him right now – not that I'm saying this was the right way to go about dealing with it, but – but do try to be a bit understanding."

"I understand more than you think," Ginny replied softly, and the shards of pain in her voice stabbed at Hermione. Mr. Weasley looked up then and locked eyes with her. She tried to swallow painfully around the large lump lodged in her throat.

"I'll – " she croaked, and had to clear her throat. "I'll take it to him." Her eyes flickered involuntarily over to Harry, who turned to look at her so abruptly that Aberforth stopped speaking to see what had diverted his attention. Hermione felt herself flush, as if she'd been caught in the act of doing something wrong. It annoyed her.

She took the mug from Ginny's outstretched hands with more irritation than she meant to, wondering why she felt so conflicted. She didn't doubt her love for Harry – or his for her – not for a second, but she wished... she wished that it had occurred under better circumstances, with Ron busy with life after graduation, perhaps playing professional Quidditch, with Ginny safely ensconced at Hogwarts, caught up in the whirlwind of invincibility and intrigue that was the seventh year. Maybe that's just selfish, she thought glumly, I want everyone to be happy, so I won't feel so guilty that I am.

Harry's eyes were still on her, she could tell without even looking, and she wondered how much of her thoughts were evident on her face. The rancid smell of the Sobriety potion assailed her nose suddenly, and her nostrils flared in disgust. She was all too aware of her nearly painfully empty stomach, and she was growing uncomfortable with the way it gurgled and sloshed in response to the offensive smell.

I am not going to throw up on Ginny, she thought fiercely.

"If the hangover doesn't cure him of drinking, the smell of this potion will," she joked lightly, and she saw the tension evident in Ginny's shoulders relax. "I'll get him out here. No one nags better than I do."

"That's the truth!" Harry called out cheekily, and she narrowed her eyes at him, even as she marveled at how closely he'd been following their conversation while pretending to listen to Aberforth. He was evidently more concerned about her feelings than he was trying to let on.

As she turned to go retrieve Ron, she looked back at her husband – husband! – and he fluttered his fingers at her slightly, leaving his arm at his side. His wedding ring gleamed in the lamplight, and she couldn't help but wonder when it would seem real.

She toyed with the idea of singing out, as she entered the partition where Ron slept, something loud and obnoxious, guaranteed to pierce his pounding head with pain, but she decided against it. Instead, she sat on the edge of his mattress, and wafted the steam from the mug under his nose.

He snorted once, recoiled, coughed, and then fluttered his eyes open to look at her accusingly.

"What the hell is that?" he asked, in a muffled tone, squinting up at her as if she had the noonday sun behind her head.

"A Sobriety potion. Drink it," she told him perfunctorily.

"Drink it? I don't want it within 10 meters of me. What the hell is in it? It smells like a dead Blast-Ended Skrewt." He tried to sit up, and

swore under his breath as he did so, closing his eyes again, and clutching at the edge of the mattress.

"I don't know. Penelope and Madam Pomfrey made it for you. And I'd think that if you can get drunk on Old Ogden's, then you can drink this." He gave her a withering look, as if to let her know that this owl-piss potion could never be in the same class as the wizarding world's finest firewhiskey. She handed Ron the mug, with her most resolute expression on her face. He took it, and peered dubiously over the rim at the contents. With a little spluttering and much profanity, he managed to chug the potion.

They sat in silence for a moment, while Ron wiped his mouth on the edge of the sheet, grimacing.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Hermione asked, once the silence had threatened to become awkward.

"Talk about what?" Ron asked thickly, averting his eyes. She narrowly avoided rolling her eyes, but instead looked at him limpidly, her brow creasing with compassion.

"About why you got drunk," she said gently, her voice a near whisper.

"Maybe I was just having a little fun," Ron said, in a tone of challenge. "My two best friends got married. What's not to celebrate?" She flinched at the sarcasm dripping from his words.

"Ron, the last thing we meant to do was –"

"Hurt me, I know," Ron interrupted her, looking at her squarely for the first time since she'd entered his room. "Just because you didn't mean to, doesn't mean it doesn't hurt," he added succinctly.

"I know," she admitted. Silence fell deafeningly once again. Then, "Harry shouldn't have asked you to stand up with us, Ron. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said heavily. "I – I'm sure that – that one day, maybe in about thirty years or so, I'll be glad I did it. I've got enough regret to be going on with anyway. No need to add that to the list." His voice

was flippant, but it did not fool her.

“Ron – ” she tried, but stopped. What was there to say? She couldn’t make it better. She couldn’t give him what he wanted. “If you ever want to talk – ” She broke off, as he shook his head, a mirthless smile crossing his face.

“If I ever feel like talking about it, Hermione, it won’t be with you. It can’t be with you. You and – you and Harry have enough to deal with... I’m – I’m not going to – I won’t burden you with – ”

“You’d never be a burden, Ron,” she cried out, passionately, desperate for him to believe her.

“Still, it’d be awkward, and I – I – you’re my two best mates! I’m the last one who should be raining on your parade...” he pointed out, sticking to his original point. She knew he was right.

“I know,” she replied, her voice barely audible. He stood up, cracking some of the vertebrae in his spine as he arched his back and groaned. As he began to rummage in his trunk for clothing, he spoke over his shoulder,

“They’re waiting on me?”

“Yes,” she replied. “Remus wants to brief us.” He nodded, and turned back to her, a bundle of clothes wadded haphazardly under his arm.

“Give me five minutes.” He was almost to the partition, which had shimmered into obliging transparency, when she called out,

“Ron?” The word leapt from her throat, almost of its own volition. He pivoted towards her, his eyebrows raised in question. “Talk to somebody. I understand if it can’t be me – or – or Harry, but you – you shouldn’t have to deal with this alone. You ought to confide in somebody.” She thought suddenly of Luna, and the watchful, contemplative way the Ravenclaw had regarded Ron at the wedding, but she did not give voice to those thoughts.

“We’ll see,” Ron said noncommittally, and stepped through the divider without another look. Hermione stood in his room for a moment, motionless and lost in thought, before proceeding in the same direction he had gone, with the patented determined gait that she had perfected at Hogwarts.

There would be just enough time to speak to Madam Pomfrey before Ron finished his shower.

She, Harry, and Ron made no attempt to conceal their collective shock when Fred arrived in the company of the mysterious visitor with whom Remus had been conversing. Hermione almost doubted her own eyes, looking uncertainly at the boys flanking her, as it for corroboration. It seemed impossible that someone could have changed so much in the few months since they’d last seen him, but then again, maybe it was events that had changed him, hardening him, altering his appearance without any real modification of his features. Harry spoke first.

“Sh – Seamus?”

“In the flesh,” their former housemate replied. His smile was small and guarded, but some light did reach his eyes at the sight of them. He looked – he looked old, Hermione realized suddenly, with the age and world-weariness that come with living under extreme stress, and she wondered where he’d been and what he’d gone through over the last four months. There was something of Harry in the shadows of his eyes. A scar ran down the side of his face, near his ear, and disappearing into the neckline of his shirt. It had been closed badly, by someone who had not had a good grasp on healing charms, perhaps Seamus himself. His hair was longer and messy; it had been cleaned with a charm recently, but had not been combed. He was wearing Muggle clothing that looked like it had seen better days, and heavy boots. Hermione noticed with surprise that some kind of very large hunting knife hung from his belt in a battered leather scabbard spattered with something dark and sinister looking. His wand was tucked alongside. His eyes moved constantly, she saw, and he positioned himself so that he was facing the entrance to the cave, even knowing the extensive security measures that had to have been in place. “It’s good to see you three.”

The Trio turned to Remus, mouths agape, dozens of questions swirling in their eyes.

“Seamus has been leading a band of resistance fighters since Voldemort’s takeover,” Lupin informed them, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “His group has been responsible for taking down quite a number of Death Eaters – some of them fairly high-level.” Seamus was watching them appraisingly.

“We got Macnair two weeks ago,” he said, speaking not in a tone of triumph or boasting, but in the same way that he would have spoken about a trip to buy groceries. Hermione’s eyes wandered down to the machete again, and then back up to Seamus’ face. His eyes gave away nothing.

“How many – how many fighters do you have?” Harry asked hoarsely. Hermione could tell that he was calculating odds behind his eyes; they needed every battle-trained witch or wizard they could possibly get.

“Right now, just seven,” Seamus said, looking almost apologetic. “But they’re almost all D.A., Harry, best trained out of Hogwarts.”

“You’ve gotten the D.A. back together?” Ron’s voice was one of disbelief. A cloud passed over Seamus’ face briefly.

“The ones who are still alive,” he clarified grimly. Hermione blanched, and saw Harry slump slightly at the table next to her. Ron’s freckles stood out on his pale face.

“W – who?” Harry managed to say, the muscles in his throat working as he struggled to speak.

“The Death Eaters came after me only a few days after the attacks in Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley. My mother was killed. I somehow managed to escape – thanks to your training, Harry – and I went to find Dean.” Harry hunched over even further at Seamus’ words of gratitude, and he looked utterly miserable. “I – it took me awhile to get there – Wizarding travel was shot by then and I didn’t want to

Apparate blindly into an unknown situation – and I was too late. He – he was – ” He faltered a little here, and seemed to need a moment to regain his composure. Hermione looked quickly at Ginny, as did both Harry and Ron, but the youngest Weasley’s face was impassive. Hermione figured that the story Seamus was telling had been heard by the rest of the Order already. He continued,

“I noticed that the Death Eaters hadn’t disturbed any of the houses around Dean’s, that they had come specifically after him. I went after Neville next, but his grandmother’s house had been ransacked, completely ripped apart.” The Trio nodded in comprehension, knowing that the Death Eaters probably hadn’t been happy when they found that their quarry had fled. “I assumed he’d been killed or captured,” Seamus continued. “It wasn’t until I ran into Fred,” he nodded at the remaining Weasley twin, “that I found out what had actually happened.” His hand nervously toyed with the clasp holding the knife in place. “The Death Eaters seemed to be targeting our house, class, or those involved with the D.A. I assumed that they were trying to squelch any kind of organization that might be loyal to Harry, and I began to try and find other D.A. members, especially the half-bloods and Muggle-born of them. Most wanted to help; a few wanted to fight. We’ve relocated families of those who seemed particular targets, and we’ve – we’ve started fighting back.” He shrugged, as if recognizing how overly simplistic that sounded.

“Who have you got?” Ron asked, curiously.

“Both Creeveys are fighting with me. So are Susan Bones, Padma Patil, Megan Jones, and Michael Corner. We had Finch-Fletchley, but Justin was killed in a raid five days ago.”

“That makes six,” Hermione said, and Seamus nodded, darting his eyes at her, as if he wished that she had not pointed that out.

“Blaise Zabini is my second in command,” he said.

“Zabini?” Ron burst out incredulously. “He’s a Slytherin. You can’t trust him! Does he know where we are?”

“None of the rest of Seamus’ group knows of Harry’s association with our group,” Remus said calmly. “Seamus doesn’t even have access, unless one of us is with him.”

“Blaise has been a good fighter. His father refused a direct order from Voldemort, so Voldemort killed him, his wife, and their daughter. Blaise was in Diagon Alley, buying a broom, and managed to escape when they came after him. When he saw what Voldemort had done... he actually came to me. He is a Slytherin, but it’s really an advantage. He knows how they think. He’s been trained for this kind of dueling since he was old enough to hold a wand. He could have betrayed us all a dozen times over, but he hasn’t.”

“You mentioned Padma. What of Parvati – and – and Lavender?” Hermione asked hesitantly, looking furtively at Ron.

“I dug Padma out of the ruins of her house. She almost died, but luckily, Susan’s healing charms are better than mine. The rest of her family was dead. We haven’t been able to find Lavender.” There was a heavy silence. Hermione thought numbly of her roommates, of Parvati giggling with Lavender over breakfast, in her exotic sari at the Yule Ball with Harry. Parvati was dead, and for some reason – the girl hadn’t been exactly what Hermione could call a friend – it was difficult to process. She looked at Ron again, who betrayed nothing of his feelings upon hearing that Lavender was missing. Harry had his fist against his mouth, propping up his head; he looked to be somewhere very far away.

“What order did Zabini’s father refuse?” He finally asked, his voice not sounding at all like his own.

“Voldemort wanted him to destroy the orphanage where he used to live. There were fifty-eight children under the age of sixteen living there at the time. The youngest one was eight months old. Blaise said his father had been having some trouble rationalizing things since the attacks. An order to kill Muggle children that were no threat to Voldemort was too much for him to take.”

“And the orphanage?” Harry pressed.

“Dolohov burned it to the ground. There were no survivors,” Seamus replied, without inflection. Hermione studied him carefully, wondering if he was really as calloused as he strove to seem.

“Seamus has been networking quite extensively,” Remus interjected. “As you can imagine, one relatively anonymous person can move with much more ease in the chaos. There’s been a sort of cooperative formed, for potions, medical supplies, and food, and Seamus has offered to be our liaison. We’d not actually be interacting much with them; the cooperative is too open, even though it is operating underground, and most of us here are too high-profile. But changes are in the offing, where it is going to be much harder to procure things we need without being apprehended.” He looked weary beyond his years, and the Trio exchanged concerned glances.

“What sorts of changes?” Hermione was finally the one to say.

“The Registry,” Seamus said grimly, with a portent of horror in his voice. He met Hermione’s eyes then, and she had an inkling of what he was going to say, before he said it. “Voldemort’s requiring everyone to register to be able to participate in any kind of purchase or transaction. Half-bloods will be consigned to a sort of lower-class status, and Muggle-borns will – ”

“ – be exterminated,” Hermione’s voice blended softly with his, as she completed his sentence for him. Seamus looked at her, and nodded once.

“He’d kill the half-bloods too, but he knows the Wizarding world couldn’t sustain itself without them.”

“And he’d be legally required to off himself,” Ron snorted in disgust.

“He’s using a registry to be able to track everyone, assuming that those who refuse to register are malcontents and troublemakers.”

“He’ll have everyone caught unregistered arrested and imprisoned, maybe killed,” Hermione predicted. “Why? If enough people stood up to him, then – ”

“People are scared,” Seamus broke in. “All they want to do is keep their families alive and stay off of Voldemort’s radar. Wizards are fleeing England in droves, but there are Death Eaters stationed at ports, Muggle airports, major Floo Centers, just looking for reasons to detain someone.” Hermione wondered exactly how much Seamus had been told, but her question was answered, when he continued. “Voldemort isn’t holding power just through fear – you know just how powerful he really is, probably better than anyone else. Professor Lupin is right – to even have a hope of success, we’ve got to get rid of his army. And if we have to storm Hogwarts, our first engagement could very well be our last stand.” His eyes flickered to each of them in turn. “We may not get any second chances.”

“We may have to face the fact that we’re in this alone. The Ministry is gone,” Remus put in. “It was beheaded by the death of Scrimgeour, and rendered useless by the attacks. The wizarding world is still reeling from the blows, and – ”

“And while it’s reeling, more people die – Muggles and wizards,” Harry finished grimly.

“The Muggles are starting to notice too. Have you noticed that Voldemort has scaled down his annihilation of Muggle villages?”

“Sorry, can’t say that we have,” Ron said derisively. “One was destroyed around our ears a few days back.”

“The one destroyed in Scotland three days ago was the first one in over a fortnight. Macnair said that it was the last one on the agenda for awhile. The Muggles have been conducting tests of their natural gas pipelines and valves, looking for malfunctions. Some have already come to the conclusion that it’s terrorist attacks.”

“They are closer to the truth than they know,” Fleur commented quietly.

“Macnair told you about Voldemort’s agenda?” Hermione’s voice was incredulous, and Seamus met her eyes squarely for a long moment, seemingly drilling into her with the intensity of his gaze.

“Yes,” he said simply, and she suddenly realized how he had gotten such information. Her mouth opened in a soundless “o”, and her eyes darted, against their will, to the leather-sheathed knife again. She swallowed noisily; her throat seemed dry and tight suddenly. She felt a myriad of emotions at once: grief that Seamus had become someone that she almost didn’t recognize at all, regret over their youth – lost irrevocably – at a time when they should be started new jobs, taking a holiday in a gap year, going on to university, finding a flat in London, and then anger – anger at what Voldemort had done to them, how he had forced their hand, how he had ripped all of this from their grasps before they had a chance to close their fingers around their futures. She allowed herself a moment of gratitude that Harry – somehow, almost inconceivably – seemed to retain his sense of self in a way that Seamus had not – imprinted on her mind’s eye was Harry, hopping over his parents’ garden wall, shovel in hand, to bury the enemy that had brought about the death of his mentor.

Then she thought of Parvati and Lavender, and a strangled sound issued involuntarily from her throat. She flushed and dropped her gaze, when everyone gathered round looked at her. Harry snaked his hand under the table, and clasped hers tightly, stroking the back of her hand with one thumb.

“The bottom line, then, is that we’re running out of time, and quickly,” Aberforth said, easing over the awkward tension. “So, we’ve come to make a decision – what happens next?”

“We don’t have enough people to even think about a strike at Hogwarts,” Tonks said. “People are scattered, missing, in hiding. I don’t know how we can hope to round up enough trustworthy souls with stones enough to go after Voldemort when he’s holed up in what is basically an impenetrable fortress.” She sighed. “I wish Hagrid were here, but maybe it’s lucky that he went to the continent before the battle started. I can’t imagine how they’d get back into England – they certainly can’t travel the Muggle way, and Grawp is not inconspicuous.” If they’re even still alive, went unspoken, but was obvious to everyone in the War Room. “We still don’t even know how many Aurors were killed when the Ministry was overthrown, or how many were stranded on assignment somewhere, and that’s assuming that most of them would want to fight Voldemort. We were lucky to

find Thad,” she shook her head at the memory of young Auror Brookhaven.

“We shouldn’t take a lot of people,” Ron spoke, at the same time as Seamus, who was also disagreeing with Tonks. “If they find out we’re coming, he’s just going to call as many clones as he can to rally round the castle.”

“Ron’s right,” Seamus said. “We need a quick strike by a relatively small and mobile force. Is there anyway to find out how many Primes there are at Hogwarts?”

Harry, Hermione, and Ron exchanged a knowing glance.

“There’s a way,” Harry said. “How much does he know – about what we know, and what we’re doing?” He spoke to Remus, but indicated with a tick of his head that he was referring to Seamus.

“He knows everything,” Remus said evenly, meeting Harry’s eyes squarely, as if measuring his response to this information. “Except where we are, how to get here... and what happened to you.” Harry let go of Hermione’s hand, and sat rigidly in the chair, every line in his body bespeaking tension. Hermione watched him pensively, her heart going out to him, as he obviously relived the ordeal yet again, though she couldn’t help but be curious about exactly how Harry would describe it to an uninvolved third party. He cleared his throat noisily, and it sounded jarring in the cavern that was nearly silent, save for the serene sound of water.

“Voldemort captured me,” Harry said shortly, his face strained and his eyes haunted. “The first day – during the Battle at Hogwarts. He took me to his family home, I – locked me in a cell, and – and tortured me for four days.” He seemed to sag a little, and Hermione quickly reached out, to take his hand again, desperate to give him some kind of physical contact for support. Seamus’ eyes seemed to glow with some kind of fiery zeal, and not a little curiosity.

“How did you escape?” he asked. Harry shook his head.

“Hermione rescued me. Portkeyed me out of there, right in front of Voldemort himself.” His voice was ragged, but there was an unmistakable undertone of pride in his voice. Seamus turned to look at Hermione with renewed admiration, but Hermione waved off Harry’s compliment.

“I was too late,” she said evenly. “Voldemort had rigged up a dampening field that drained away Harry’s magic. He was left completely helpless, like a – like a Muggle.” She would not use the word ‘squib’.

Seamus looked at Harry, horrified. Hermione took cynical note that Seamus seemed more concerned about not having Harry as an asset than about what the lack of magic had actually done to Harry, but almost immediately took herself to task for thinking it. This is war, Hermione. Of course he’s thinking in terms of assets and liabilities. Harry did the same thing.

“They found out that they could do magic together, though,” Ron interjected awkwardly, startling nearly everyone. “Harry’s been getting his magic back, slowly, even though no one thought he’d be able to.”

“But I’m nowhere near being able to face Voldemort,” Harry finished for him grimly. “And every day that goes by, he’s – ” He swore, and didn’t finish his sentence. Hermione patted his hand in sympathy, watching him with eyes hooded under creased brows. Seamus’ gaze was drawn to the movement of her hand, and he did a double take.

“And you – you two are married?” he asked hesitantly. Harry and Hermione exchanged glances and nodded. Hermione, for her part, did not miss Seamus’ curious, but mercifully wordless, glance at Ron.

“Two days ago,” Harry offered up awkwardly, and Seamus offered them his congratulations, which they accepted, somewhat self-consciously.

“You said – you said there was a way,” Seamus redirected the conversation back to what they’d been discussing earlier. “What way?” Harry glanced at Ron, and jerked his head in the direction of

the locked trunk in the corner, where the Marauder's Map now resided.

For one brief moment, Hermione saw Seamus as he had been, when she'd known him not so long ago at Hogwarts.

"Bloody hell," he said, impressed, as he watched the map ink itself with the whereabouts of everyone at Hogwarts. "I'd heard rumors that something like this existed, but I didn't think they were true." He half-smiled and shook his head. Hermione thought that he looked like he might have, in a happier time, taken Harry and Ron to task for keeping as delicious a thing as that map a secret. But Seamus was different now – they all were – and he did not say anything else, but immediately began scanning the map, as they pointed out the differences in the ink and what they signified.

"They seem to have free run of the castle...except for Neville," Ron said, looking at the lone dot in the Slytherin dungeons with chagrin. The group seemed to pause for an almost infinitesimal moment, as if some higher power had paused everything for a heartbeat.

"What are we going to do about Neville?" Hermione finally ventured, clearing her throat.

"Yes, what?" Ginny asked. Hermione thought fleetingly about the cloned Neville's tender behavior towards her, while she was in her coma. She wondered how much of it was fueled by real-Neville sentiment and how much was merely to gain access to the infirmary, where he had set up his Listening device.

"There's nothing we can do about him," Seamus said firmly. "He's down in the dungeons. There's no easy way to get there, and no easy escape once someone is down there. Anyone attempting to go after him could be trapped. The Death Eaters," he all but spat the name, "probably have him under heavy guard, hoping for just that situation."

"We can't just leave him there!" Hermione cried. "He's been a captive to Voldemort for four months!" Involuntarily, her eyes went to Harry, and his gaze dropped from her to his lap. She winced, not having wanted to remind him that he had once been in the same situation.

She knew that Harry had identified with Neville ever since the prophecy revealed that their fates had been closely aligned. He looked at her again, and seemed to be internally debating something. Finally, he closed his eyes, and shook his head. Her heart sank.

"We can't risk the personnel," Harry finally said. "Almost all of those Death Eaters were in Slytherin. They'll know the dungeons better than we ever could, and – " He stopped, when Hermione suddenly hunched over the unfurled Marauder's Map, and began examining it carefully.

"Even though we have this?" she asked, and her eyes were bright with determination, looking much as she had the evening before a particularly intimidating exam. She snapped her head suddenly to the left, spearing Remus with a look. "Suppose we find your caved-in tunnel, Professor?" She tapped the map with a slender finger, hitting the first three letters in "Longbottom". "The entrance to the tunnel is not far from where they're keeping him."

"If you think we can find the other end, and get through it..." Harry said, conceding her point. Seamus didn't agree.

"It's still too risky. We don't know who's watching, what they've done to him. Suppose they have one of these?" He indicated the parchment on the table. "Suppose... they've turned him?"

"He wouldn't..." Harry said quickly, shaking his head. "Not Neville – not after his parents..."

"The clone was acting against you, wasn't he?"

"That's differ – " Ron tried to say, but Seamus barreled on.

"How exactly is it different? He was under outside influence, wasn't he? Who's to say Neville won't be the same? Under some kind of potion, or the Imperius? His cell could be sabotaged, warded, booby-trapped..."

"You don't know that!" Hermione nearly shouted, her voice coming out more shrilly than she would have liked.

"You haven't seen what I've seen!" Seamus yelled back, and the mask was dropped. In his eyes glittered vague and horrible remembrances of monstrosities committed in the name of Voldemort. "In ... In Kent, there was a father – a half-blood who'd married a Muggle. The Death Eaters came after him, because his father had been killed in the first war against Voldemort. He tried to fight – to protect his wife and son – and fired a curse at them, and they reflected it back – not at him, but at his child. By the time we got close enough, they had dragged his pretty Muggle wife away. He turned his wand on himself, before we could stop him. Susan, Michael, and I managed to take down five of the Death Eaters, but I was too late to save the wife." He swallowed, and the muscles in his throat worked visibly. "Emotional attachments get you killed."

Seamus' words brought back unwelcome memories, as Hermione thought of the Muggles on the dais at the rally, staring at the roiling, jeering crowd without comprehension, the body of the little girl in Godric's Hollow, Harry clutching the screaming baby in the ruins of a Scottish town, Malfoy's crumpled, bloody body laying at Harry's and her feet, Harry watching in horror as Voldemort slit the throat of a girl who looked just like her.

"We've seen our share of horrors, Seamus," Harry said in a tired voice. "But sentiment is what keeps us from being Death Eaters. If we can find that tunnel, and make it into the Hogwarts' dungeons undetected, then we will try and save Neville. Don't tell me you wouldn't give your life for one of your team, if you had to."

The two men stared at each other for a moment, and Seamus said,

"In a heartbeat." Harry seemed to search for something in Seamus' face, and he must have found it, for he answered,

"Good. Then we understand each other."

Hermione eyed the edge of the cave dubiously, where water, tinted by the smooth gray walls, floor, and ceiling of the cavern, looked uncomfortably clear and icy cold. She knew that the water would change to a cloudier murk, when they were out in the silty body of the main lake. Harry caught her glance.

“Are you sure you’re up to this?” he asked, his eyes going solicitously to her bandaged arms. She nodded.

“Madam Pomfrey water-proofed them,” she responded, looking at the bandages so she wouldn’t have to look at him.

“You don’t have to go,” he said, obviously not buying for a second the excuse that her arms were the reason she was concerned. “I know you’re not comfortable with – ” He gestured out at the placid water, rather than finishing his sentence.

“I’m fine, Harry,” she said acerbically. “Besides, you need me in case you lose your Bubblehead charm.” They were traveling in groups of two: she and Harry, Remus and Tonks, and Seamus and Ron. They would be relying on Remus’ memory – over two decades old – of about how far the tunnel went before the cave-in, and where exactly it would be located. Hermione worked her lower lip between her teeth as she gazed at the water, her brow wrinkling in concentration. When she looked up, Harry was regarding her quizzically. She smiled at him self-consciously. “Just... thinking,” she said.

“Really?” he replied in mock surprise. When she narrowed her eyes at him, he hastened to explain, reaching out to tuck an unruly lock of hair behind her ear, as he did so. “You don’t think I know most of your expressions by now, Hermione?” She swayed more closely to him.

“I may surprise you yet, Mr. Potter,” she said breathily, feeling her eyes start to flutter closed.

The moment was lost when the other four joined them at the mouth of the cavern, and Harry and Hermione slid quickly apart, avoiding each other’s eyes, as well as Ron’s.

“All right,” said Remus, evidently intent on pretending he had seen nothing. “The tunnel comes south out of the Hogwarts’ dungeons, and skirts along the shore of the lake for awhile, before finally going beneath it. I’m not entirely sure why. The cave-in should be as it draws near to the shore again – it really almost doubles back on itself. I suppose the flooded part would be all that lies below the water level

– could be as much as two hundred or three hundred meters. What we’re looking for would be any kind of crack or chasm opening. If you see something that looks promising, send out the signal.” His eyes tripped over the five other faces listening intently. Hermione had taught them all a charm that would send out a series of dulcet tones, almost like those of a flute, since sparks did not travel well through water. A trail of stationary colored bubbles would mark a trail back to the one who’d cast the charm. “There aren’t any lethal threats that we know of, but it would not be wise to investigate anything alone.”

Hermione felt a small shudder run over her frame as she thought of willingly poking into any dark underwater crevice with Merlin only knew what inside. She noted that Ron appeared about as eager as she.

“We won’t be near the undersea city, so the mer-people most likely won’t be a problem, but if they are, Harry or I should be able to sort them out,” Remus added. Harry’s face was set and determined, and she took comfort from it. He placed one hand on the small of her back, and extended the other arm to the lake.

“Shall we?”

The close-fitting clothing they wore carried built-in Warming charms, but Hermione couldn’t refrain from drawing in a noisy breath between barely parted teeth when she stepped into the frigid water, padding in on the rubber soled flippers into which they’d all transfigured their normal footwear. When the water reached their waists, and the ceiling of the cavern was less than an arm’s length above their heads, she stopped and turned toward him. She felt his hand clasp hers beneath the water-line, and she smiled gratefully as she cast the Bubblehead charm on them both.

The world around her instantly became distorted, as if she were viewing everything through a fish-eye lens. The air seemed somehow stale, and her breathing sounded harsh and noisy in her ears. She nodded at Harry, squeezing his hand once, before they both plunged beneath the surface of the lake.

It was odd, she thought, faintly feeling the enveloping sensation of the water on every part of her save that from the neck up. The bubble shimmered and wobbled gelatinously as she moved, and Harry's voice sounded tinny and far away when he spoke.

"Watch out for grindylows," he cautioned her. "I might be able to manage Relashio, but I wouldn't want to stake everything on it." Something dark glided wraith-like on the periphery of her vision, and she started, until she realized that it was Remus and Tonks, veering away from them to check the portion of the lake nearest to the cave, along the eastern shoreline, where the tunnel had been known to run. She and Harry had the middle section on the same side, while Ron and Seamus would investigate the area nearest to Hogwarts.

The underwater world was eerie and silent, with strange shapes lifting and floating lightly with the movement of the lake itself. Not much could be seen beyond their immediate surroundings, and Remus and Tonks had quickly faded from view. As she and Harry slowed their swim, and began to examine the lake floor more thoroughly, Seamus and Ron passed them – Seamus nodding at them matter-of-factly – and had soon vanished from sight as well. Hermione kept one wary eye out for the insidious little water demons, but felt oddly bereft, strangely alone in this alien place. She wanted to reach out and grab Harry's hand, but restrained herself, trying to calm herself with the reassurance of his mere presence.

The floor of the lake rose up sharply in front of them like a slanted wall, studded with rocks, water plants, and the occasional discarded item. At the height of the earthen structure, she could just begin to see a paler gray-blue shade to the water, as it was brightened by the sun, and she realized with some astonishment that she hadn't seen daylight in more than three days.

"We could be easier to see if we're in the shallows, if anyone happened to be looking," Harry said. His bubble rippled as he spoke. "But if the tunnel hugs the shoreline, that's where the cave-in probably is, as well. The water's murky enough, where we'll probably be fine, as long as we stay near the bottom. Keep an eye out."

Hermione knew what he meant. The shallows – called that, even though they got as deep as thirty or forty feet before steeply dropping off – were thickly festooned with underwater plant growth, which would make crevices difficult to see – and which grindylows loved.

“Let’s go, then,” she said, amazed that her voice still sounded normal to her, when Harry’s sounded so faint.

They began their ascent toward the sun.

After what seemed like days of searching in an endless sea of fluttering underwater plants, Hermione was exhausted. She had renewed their Bubblehead charms twice, and even though only the gentlest kicks seemed to send them skimming almost effortlessly through the water, she suddenly felt like all her bones had turned to liquid. Exhaustion was seeping into her very marrow, and she knew it wouldn’t be long before Harry noticed it. Grindylows had darted and flashed quickly in and out of view twice, but they appeared to recognize Harry – even from years earlier – and either the sight of him, or their wands, or both, was enough to make them keep their distance.

“Hermione, are you – ” Harry began, and she steeled herself for his gentle rant, but he never finished. “What the hell?” His tone was one of quiet mystification, and he left her side to pick up something from the silken soft dirt layering the lake floor. She saw it glinting between his fingers, as he moved to rejoin her, but something else caused him to arrest his motion.

“Hermione? Hermione, I think this might be it. Come here.” There was excitement evident in his tinny voice, and she swam down to his side. There, almost screened with a particularly thick growth of vegetation, the lake floor rose up sharply again, presenting them with a smaller version of the “wall” they had scaled earlier. In the curve, where the floor sloped upward was a mound of rocks, faintly resembling an underwater cairn. Comparing it to the surrounding topography, Hermione surmised that the pile had at one time been one solid boulder, and had been smashed into rubble. If it made up part of the tunnel wall, its destruction could have brought about the cave-in and the subsequent flooding of the tunnel. She used her wand to lift one

smallish rock experimentally out of the way, and saw, not the earth of the lake floor, but blackness. "Send the signal," Harry said, exchanging excited and relieved glances.

"What was it you picked up?" Hermione asked curiously, as the pure notes sounded ethereally in the water like haunting sea-song. She watched as two trails of golden bubbles materialized, one from the north and one from the south, moving from beyond her field of vision back toward her.

Harry grinned boyishly, and held out his hand. Something gold winked at her from his palm, and she reached out to take it. It appeared to be part of a Muggle money clip, or perhaps a key fob from which the ring had been detached. It had obviously been underwater for quite some time, and the plating was discolored and nearly gone. Hermione had to brush at the surface for a moment, before she could make out the engraving. D. C. She looked at Harry uncomprehendingly, and his smile grew broader.

"I'll have Seamus give it to him," he said simply, and then she realized to whom it had belonged.

"Do you reckon he missed it after falling off the boat before his Sorting feast?" she asked teasingly, and he grinned reminiscently, though there was a hint of sadness behind his smile. She proffered the article back to him, and he tucked it carefully into a zippered pocket.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hermione spotted a dark shape that separated itself into two as it drew nearer. She kept her wand ready, until she saw for sure that it was Remus and Tonks.

"What have you got?" Remus asked eagerly. Harry indicated the haphazard mound of rock, and they began to dislodge more of the pile, Remus with his wand, and Harry manually, the water facilitating his movement of the heavy stone. Tonks was keeping watch, wand out, and Hermione looked around anxiously.

“Why didn’t Ron and Seamus come?” she asked Tonks sotto voce. The Auror’s hair glowed pink and shimmering beneath her Bubblehead charm.

“They could have just had more distance to cover than Remus and me,” Tonks said reassuringly. But Hermione noticed that her eyes roved more often to the north, in the direction from which Seamus and Ron were to come.

She turned back to Harry and Remus, half-fearful that uncovering the tunnel would suck them into darkness, before realizing that the lake and tunnel would have reached equilibrium with each other long ago. The hole was large enough to accommodate a couple of people side by side, and Harry appeared to be arguing for immediate entrance. Remus shook his head, and she could barely hear his voice.

“Let’s wait for Seamus and Ron. We’ll have to be careful... this is the side of the cave-in leading away from Hogwarts, and we don’t know where it will come out.”

To release some of her slowly building anxiety, Hermione sounded the spell again. A second stream of sparkling bubbles joined the first. Almost immediately thereafter, she saw them, as she’d seen Remus and Tonks, a dark shape unified by the obscuring water, then becoming more defined.

This set of shapes was moving in a much more lurching fashion than had the others. Hermione strained her eyes, and thought she saw a reddish tint to the water around them. One hand went to her mouth, and she had a moment of bewilderment when her palm encountered the bubble instead of her lips.

“Tonks – ” she said woodenly, her eyes fixed on the approaching duo. The Auror turned, and Hermione saw her eyes widen in alarm, as she observed the same thing Hermione had. They exchanged a fleeting glance, and sprang into action, swimming toward Seamus and Ron.

Seamus was swimming, his hands clenched tightly around Ron, who appeared to be floating in and out of consciousness. Blood was

trailing from him, first leaving furling scarlet ribbons in the water that then faded into pinkish clouds.

“They attacked us – there had to have been two or three dozen of them,” Seamus was breathless, and paused to heft Ron more securely under his arms. Tonks moved to his side to help support Ron’s bulk between them. “Ron lost his Bubblehead charm. They set on him when he was trying to recast. They’re coming.”

Hermione didn’t have to ask what Seamus was talking about. Mer-people would not attack so far from their city without provocation. Even as her lips formed around the word “grindylow”, she saw the churning of the water as they came. A high-pitching shrieking chatter reached her ears.

“Damn,” Tonks said, in a kind of swearing sigh. “Remus, it’s grindylows,” she called out behind her, and the other two looked up.

“Ron!” Harry wheezed in alarm, as he noted the cloud of blood that permeated the water around the other four. Remus looked grim.

“The blood is only going to stir up others. This whole area is going to be swarming with grindylows momentarily.”

“Then we should get out of here,” Tonks said. “Ron needs medical attention anyway.” Remus shook his head.

“We’ve got to block up this tunnel. If the grindylows find it, they’ll infest it. It could be weeks before we could clear it out enough to use it.”

“We don’t have weeks!” Seamus said.

“We could get inside, and block it up that way,” Harry suggested.

“Blocking yourself inside a tunnel when you don’t know where it goes is rather risky,” Remus said.

“We should have brought more than just your medallion, Tonks,” Hermione shook her head grimly. “I know we’d have risked losing them, but it was a mistake.”

“There was no way to know that the grindylows would attack in force,” Remus argued. “That’s not really their way, and there was nothing else to fear in the lake.”

“Bodies,” Seamus said succinctly, and the others looked at him in confusion. “We saw bodies – Ron and I – near the boating gate that leads into Hogwarts.” Tonks appeared to understand what he was getting at.

“If the Death Eaters have been throwing bodies into the Lake, and the grindylows have been feeding on them...”

“Those bastards have been giving them a taste for human flesh,” Harry said in a disbelieving voice.

The grindylows had now drawn too close for further discussion. Seamus thrust Ron at Harry, and turned to face them, wand at the ready. Remus motioned for Hermione to join Harry and Ron by the tunnel entrance.

“It’s up to you to keep them safe,” he said. “Harry may not be able to do much to help you, but he can at least get that tunnel closed up. Ron’s blood is going to draw them. We’ll stay in front.” Hermione nodded, swallowing hard, and moved down to the tunnel with Harry. They situated Ron as close to the tunnel mouth as they dared, and Hermione cast an Anchoring charm on his left foot. Harry began to move the rocks as quickly as he could, with Hermione occasionally aiding him, but mostly watching for grindylows. Every now and then, a curse flashed from her wand in a white-hot stream of boiling water.

The grindylows were everywhere. One on one, they might have been no match for even a Hogwarts student, but this was like nothing Hermione had ever seen or imagined. Seamus had said two or three dozen, but the writhing, zipping number now had to be at least two or three times that. They darted everywhere, little lethal barbs of green lightning, tipped with razor sharp claws and teeth.

There were a few beginning to breach the line that Remus, Tonks, and Seamus had formed, but Hermione managed to dispatch them quickly, all the while casting anxious glances at Harry's progress blocking the tunnel, and checking Ron.

Her first indication that something was wrong was Tonks head flinging backwards in a shimmering pink arc that caught her eye immediately. Remus turned toward her in alarm, as her charm burst. Blood frothed in the spray of bubbles, as Remus tried vainly to recast the charm, while Seamus worked alone to fend off the grindylows.

And then everything seemed to happen at once.

Hermione saw the shiny glint of the medallion, as it floated away from Tonks' neck, falling in slow motion, so slowly that it seemed to mock Hermione, to vanish in the silt and vegetation of the lake bottom.

"Remus! The medallion!" She shrieked, but the werewolf had no time to visibly react to her cry. He had just recast Tonks' charm, and was fiendishly trying to keep the grindylows from overrunning Seamus.

This is ridiculous. We're the Order of the Phoenix, and we're going to drown in the Lake after being utterly worsted by water demons! That was the last coherent thought Hermione had for some time, as she heard Harry's hoarse cry,

"Hermione!" She had just enough to look up before two impossibly fast blurs slammed into each arm, pushing her through and over Ron, and pinioning her into the earthen bank, just to the right of the darkness leading into the tunnel. Incredible pain shot up both arms, as claws gripped tender, newly healed flesh. She heard Harry swear violently, as he abandoned the tunnel, and ripped one grindyflow off of her by one pointed ear.

Then there was a third coming at them, and a fourth. Hermione noted with horror that when she had collided with Ron, the bleeding had increased. The water stained slowly, inexorably.

They were drawing attention.

Harry seemed to be doing well enough, but was going to be outmatched very soon by sheer numbers alone. Even as she managed to blast one or two of them back, it seemed there were always more to take their place. She saw Remus Summon the medallion, and grab for Tonks, shouting for Seamus, then pivoting to shout for Harry.

She saw Harry shake his head at Remus.

“Go!”

Remus tried to Summon Ron, but the Anchoring charm held firm. She couldn't be sure, but she thought that one of the bones in Ron's lower leg snapped.

“Remus!” She tried to call, her voice sounding pathetically small under the Bubblehead charm. She tried to ignore the sight of her own blood drifting in front of her. “The Anchoring charm. Undo the – ”

Another grindylow hurtled itself at her, and the resulting collision caused the wall immediately adjacent to the opening to fail. She fell backwards in a mass of earth and rock and wiry little bodies. Her vision was completely obscured by the swirling silt, but it seemed that, by some miracle, her Bubblehead charm was intact.

“Hermione!” she dizzily heard Harry's panicked voice. “Oh, God! Hermione!”

She had dropped her wand, but managed to fling the one grindylow that appeared to be unfazed by the fall off of her, where it scrambled around, as disoriented as she by the murky darkness.

“Harry,” she called back. “I – I think I'm all right. Get Ron, and get in here quickly. This may be our only way out.”

There was no answer, but the scuffle outside continued with ferocity, and, as the silt began to resettle, she could see a vague outline against the open mouth of the tunnel. Something surged toward her, and she realized that it was Ron, heaved toward her by Harry, still

unconscious. It was a mercy, she thought, as she observed the sickeningly cock-eyed angle of his leg.

Then she saw Harry's silhouette, as he clambered through the tunnel mouth, and began to hastily fill in the tunnel. Hermione Summoned her wand, and aimed a few Relashios toward the entrance, but was more afraid of hitting Harry. Water rippled and rocks and silt flew, as Harry desperately tried to block up the hole and fend off the grindylows, alternating between physical and magical means as best he could.

Finally, Hermione saw the last chink of lighter water wink out, as the gap was filled with a rock, and she sensed, rather than saw, Harry swing heavily in the direction in which he'd last seen her.

"Hermione?" he inquired.

"Lumos!" she replied. A blue-white light burst forth from her wand, and Harry blasted the last straggling grindyflow that had made it inside with them. They hefted Ron between them, and gazed with some trepidation on the water-filled tunnel that twisted downward into darkness.

TBC

Okay, don't anybody be too picky about my physics with the flooded tunnel. I don't think that something like that would drain the lake like a bathtub, but I'm not entirely sure.

Hope you enjoy this chapter. We'll find out how everyone fared in the next one. You may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Nineteen: Passages

Harry and Hermione floated in silence for a moment that seemed to last forever, looking with trepidation down the length of the tunnel, which seemed to twist downward into utter blackness once it escaped the bluish light of Hermione's wand. Ron lolled between them, his bubble occasionally ricocheting off of one of theirs. Harry turned and looked behind them. The wand gave off just enough light to disclose a tightly packed network of rocks blocking the portion of the tunnel that presumably led back to the school.

"Hermione?" Harry spoke presently, causing Hermione to jump slightly. "D'you reckon – is there anything we should do for Ron?" Hermione brought her wand closer to Ron, and studied his pale face closely. She shook her head, and the light reflected off of her charm and obscured her features.

"It looks like his injuries have stopped bleeding," she said with a sigh. "I'm don't know how a healing charm would – " she stopped and shrugged. "I guess it's worth a try, at least." She murmured the incantation under her breath, and a small chain of pinkish bubbles issued from her wand, colliding with the angry red weal on Ron's arm and vanishing with a soundless pop when they touched his skin. It was difficult to discern for certain, but the livid nature of the wound seemed to have eased somewhat. She quickly performed the charm on his other injuries as well. "He still needs to see Madam Pomfrey as quickly as possible," she said to Harry, her brow creased with anxiety.

"What about ... his leg?" Harry said hesitantly, and when Hermione looked down, she felt her gorge rise at the sight of Ron's leg, floating serenely out of sync with the rest of his body.

"Grab it," she ordered, and then rolled her eyes at his look. "Honestly, Harry, you're going to have to hold it still, while I fuse the bone. He's not going to feel it; he's unconscious." This proved more difficult than it originally appeared because there was nothing to brace against, but they finally did the job to Hermione's satisfaction. At least, his leg isn't bobbing around, bent the wrong way, she thought, eying her handiwork critically.

Harry's eyes went down to the dark length of the tunnel that stretched before them. All sounds from outside had faded, and Hermione hoped that meant that Remus, Tonks, and Seamus had gotten safely away. When she looked up, Harry was staring at her, and when their eyes met, he inclined his head in the direction of the tunnel, as if to say, might as well give it a go. Sharing the burden of Ron between them, they began to swim.

The tunnel was mostly featureless, merely rounded smooth walls of hard packed muck. They passed occasional tendrils of root, but didn't know whether they came from land or water plants. Hermione's wand illuminated only the area immediately surrounding them, what was behind them and what awaited them remaining shrouded in inky blackness. Their path curved slightly, first one way and then the other, but appeared to be continuing largely south, as best Hermione could tell, roughly following the shoreline of the lake away from Hogwarts.

It was impossible to gauge how much time and distance had passed in the dark and unchanging environment in which they found themselves. The silence between them was heavy and fraught with anxiety and not a little fear. Ron's face appeared eerily pale in the otherworldly light of the wand, and Hermione found her eyes going back to him quite frequently, hoping that he was going to be all right.

Finally, she could continue on no longer without a break, and stopped her forward motion, holding Ron steady with her weaker left arm, to stretch the kinks out of her right arm. Even the slight burden of Ron underwater was taking its toll, a small but steady backward pull for them to fight against. Harry looked at her with some alarm.

"Hermione, are you okay?" He seemed to have just remembered that she had injuries that were newly healed, and she could see the hints of self-castigation that began to swirl in his eyes.

"I'm fine, Harry," she told him gently, but firmly. "I'm just a little stiff."

"I can bring him along," he said. "You shouldn't wear yourself out." She speared him with a chiding look.

“Nonsense,” she sniffed. “We’ll try this: Mobilicorpus,” she intoned, pointing her wand at Ron. A white stream shot from her wand, slowing as it reached Ron’s floating body so that they could almost see the individual bubbles, which split on contact with Ron, moving around and beneath him. Cautiously, Harry let go of Ron, and found that he bobbed serenely in place, cushioned and surrounding by a myriad of bubbles. He threw an admiring look at her, but she merely said in a matter-of-fact way, “Excellent. Now all we have to do is steer him.”

Slowly, so subtly as to barely be noticeable, the floor began to slope upward beneath them. Before they had gone too much farther, the water level dropped, and they were able first to paddle with their heads above water, and then to walk. Finally they reached a place where the tunnel rose out of the water altogether, and Hermione allowed herself to breathe a sigh of relief, as her wobbly legs folded under her and she collapsed on solid ground. She banished their Bubble-head charms from her recumbent position.

“If you thought the Second Task turned me off of water, you haven’t seen anything yet,” she said to Harry, only half-joking, as he carefully deposited Ron nearby. He smiled at her comment, but there was concern behind his eyes.

“How far do you suppose we’ve come?” he asked, keeping his voice low and his wand in hand, even though they’d had no evidence that anyone had frequented this tunnel since the cave-in – or possibly even before that.

“I have no idea,” Hermione admitted helplessly. “Surely, we should be coming to the southern edge of the lake by now. That may be why we’ve come up out of the water.” She allowed herself to lie slumped against the damp wall for a moment longer, and then straightened, methodically casting Drying charms on all three of them, and moving closer to Ron to check his injuries.

“We should try to wake him up,” Harry said. “We’ll cover more ground if one of us isn’t having to Levitate him.”

“We don’t know that there’s any kind of threat down here,” Hermione argued. “It would appear that no one’s been down here in ages. If we make him walk, he could aggravate his injuries.”

“We don’t know that there’s not a threat down here. We don’t know where this tunnel empties. Need I remind you that my magic is not necessarily something you want to rely on as backup?” She flinched a little at his tone, and she saw apology flash in his eyes very briefly. He pressed his lips together, as if steeling himself for a difficult decision. “We need his wand. Wake him up.” She bristled at his peremptory voice, but acquiesced with a muttered,

“I think this is a mistake,” before tapping Ron with her wand and saying, “Enervate.” They both hovered over him for a heart-stopping moment, before Ron groaned, stirred, and opened his eyes, blinking against the harsh light of Hermione’s wand. He looked at the two of them, tried to sit up, and then winced, reflexively placing a hand against his side.

“What the hell happened?” he asked in confusion, his forehead wrinkling as memory returned to him slowly. “The grindylows – they came out of nowhere. Where is Seamus? Tonks? Where are they?” Harry and Hermione exchanged glances, looking grim.

“We hope that they got back to the cave safely. Remus had Tonks’ medallion,” Hermione finally said.

“Then where are we?” Ron asked, peering dubiously around the tunnel, his eyes lighting uncomfortably on the unnervingly placid, dark water from which they had just emerged, as though he thought something might come up out of it after them. Harry and Hermione quickly gave him a summary of how they’d ended up in the very tunnel that they’d been attempting to locate. “Well, that’s a fair bit of luck, then,” he said, beginning to sound more optimistic.

“If the tunnel doesn’t open out into some sort of Death Eater conclave,” Harry muttered darkly, causing Ron to look at him in alarm. Hermione shot Harry a look, and then tucked one arm under Ron’s elbow, asking him,

“Do you think you can stand?” Ron nodded gamely, and together the three of them struggled to get him to his feet. There were a couple of gashes that Hermione had missed beneath his clothing, and she healed these with feigned nonchalance, her fingers skimming lightly over his skin, while Ron flushed red.

“Damn grindylows,” was all he said, but his stance eased slightly as Hermione completed the healing charms.

“Can you walk?” Harry asked gruffly. Hermione pursed her lips together, but said nothing, and busied herself returning their transfigured flippers back to their original footwear.

“Yeah,” Ron said experimentally, taking a few steps, and then answering with more confidence, “Yeah, I’ll be all right.” Hermione noticed that his hand went back to his side, and stayed there, but he walked without too much faltering, so she let it go.

They walked on, still silent, afraid that any conversation could carry to some undiscovered, unfriendly ears. Hermione noticed that the walls of the tunnel became drier, the earth packing them became more crumbly, and more than once she thought she saw something skitter about out of the corner of her eye.

She decided not to mention it to Ron.

She and Harry had walked side by side for awhile, knuckles brushing casually now and again. Occasionally the wandlight would catch the metal of one of their rings, and it would draw her attention. My husband, she thought, marveling. Harry is my husband.

If Voldemort didn’t have enough of an excuse to want to kill her before, he certainly did now, was her rather philosophic way of thinking about it. She decided not to mention that to Harry.

As they continued down the tunnel, there were subtle changes. The floor was smoother, steeper angles were navigated with a smooth flagstone stair or two. Harry grew increasingly nervous at these intermittent signs of human trespass, and moved more quickly, though quietly, keeping close to the sloping tunnel walls.

Hermione was started to lag. The muscles of her shoulder were screaming at her, and her water-proofed bandages were stiff and beginning to chafe. Ron had slowed as well, and was struggling to keep in step with her, one hand at his side. He was beginning to limp quite noticeably, and his breath was coming in noisy gasps, as he tried to walk normally.

“Ron!” Hermione burst out in a low voice nonetheless tinged with exasperation. She came to an abrupt stop, twisting and turning her head to work out the ache in her neck and shoulder, wincing as one of the muscles pulled painfully. He stopped and turned, pivoting on the leg he was trying to favor and letting out a harsh groan that he tried to mask as the word,

“What?”

“How’s your leg?”

“Hurts a bit, actually,” he replied, trying to sound diffident, and she looked at him apologetically, while also appearing frustrated with herself.

“Remus tried to Summon you, while you were under an Anchoring charm,” she confessed, and flinched when Ron shuddered at the thought. “Bone fusing charms are a little tricky to cast when you’re under water. Shall I try again?”

“No, it just aches. I think I’ll be all right.” Hermione eyed him for a moment, trying to figure out if he was telling the truth, or just didn’t want her mucking about with his leg again. Harry had noticed that they were no longer following, and had turned back toward them, retracing his steps.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, as he approached. “Do you need to stop?” Something caught his eye, and he moved abruptly into the shadows near the opposite wall, kneeling down to examine something carefully.

A moment later, he stood and moved into Hermione’s circle of wandlight, holding something long and tapered in his fingers.

"That looks like a torch sconce," Hermione observed. Harry's eyes grew grim, and he turned back toward the direction in which they'd been heading.

"Then someone's been down here," he observed.

"Harry, look at the dirt caked on that thing. It's been down here for ages."

"Remus said that the Marauders never found the other end of the tunnel."

"So maybe it wasn't the Marauders," Hermione suggested easily. At Harry and Ron's dubious looks, she said, "What? It doesn't mean that it was someone with nefarious intent."

"This is Harry we're dealing with here... of course it does," Ron said glibly, and Harry gave him a dirty look.

"We'll have to slow the pace a bit, Harry," Hermione said. "I'm knackered, and Ron's leg – well, apparently I'm not as handy with bone fusing charms as I'd like." She sounded stricken.

"Hermione, for the love of Merlin, I told you it was fine!" Ron burst out, annoyed.

"Can you two please keep your voices down?" Harry pleaded in an urgent whisper. "We don't know –"

"Harry, there hasn't been a living soul, Dark or otherwise, down here for ages," Hermione argued. "That sconce had to be more than a decade old, maybe two."

"I'm just saying that – that in one way or another we're all walking wounded here, and we need to be careful." Something in his words brought to their minds not just their physical state, but their tenuous emotional connection as well, and the three of them fell silent. Hermione's gaze bounced off of Ron's uncomfortable expression, and collided with Harry's, whose worry for them seemed to be battling

with fierce determination and not a little shame that he was not adept enough to keep them safe.

“Perhaps you’re right, Harry,” Hermione said quietly, surprising the two boys. “Let’s try to move more quickly and more quietly.” Ron pushed himself away from the wall of the tunnel, brushing a little dirt from his shoulder.

“Well then,” he said laconically. “Let’s just – ” As he spoke, he took a step forward, and his leg just buckled beneath him. Harry and Hermione watched in horror, as he folded up like an accordion, almost succeeding in biting back a hoarse cry of pain.

“Oh, Merlin, Ron!” Hermione said, thinking frantically as she rushed to kneel beside him. We studied this in our field medicine courses; how could I be such rubbish at such an important charm right now when we need it so much; how could I hurt him – it’s all my fault... it – Her racing thoughts were stilled at the gentle touch of a hand on her arm.

Harry.

He had knelt beside her in the dirt of the tunnel, and was looking at her as if he knew exactly the direction her thoughts were running.

“It’s not your fault, Hermione. We were under water. Take a deep breath, calm down, and check his leg. If we need to, we can recast the charm.” She stared at him blankly for a moment, and then inhaled deeply, as he instructed, her teeth clattering together a little with the trembling of her jaw.

“Ron, you all right?” she heard Harry ask solicitously.

“B – bugger!” Ron finally swore, his voice a ghost of its normal self, little more than a wheeze. When Hermione dared to look down at him, his face was frighteningly pale and beads of sweat stood out on his forehead and upper lip.

“Ron, I’m so sorry,” she said, looking at him with agonized eyes, her hands clasped together, as if in supplication. Harry handed her her wand, picking it up from where she’d dropped it in her worry.

"Sall right," Ron said, a wraith-like smile flickering across his face briefly. She looked at Harry hesitantly, her self-confidence clearly rattled.

"You'll do fine," Harry said, as if willing it to be so, nearly drilling into her with the intensity of his gaze. She undid the fusing charm, and winced at the crackle as Ron's bone essentially re-broke. Ron hissed a sort of nnggg sound between his teeth.

"We should Stun him," she said in a wooden voice. Harry raised his wand, but Ron interrupted.

"No! Just – just do it, quickly," he said, his voice not much more than a gasp. She threw one last beseeching look at his gray face, and reached down to straighten his leg, where it had folded beneath his when he fell. Ron's back arched and the veins stood out in his neck, as he fought to stay silent. A thin trickle of blood came from the corner of his mouth as he clamped down on his lip with his teeth. His fingers curved into claws and delved into the earthen floor of the tunnel, leaving jagged furrows in their wake. She and Harry both cupped the bottom of his shoe, holding his leg straight and steady, as she said the incantation. The area just above his ankle glowed a translucent, pulsing pink for a moment, as Ron tensed again, noisily inhaling and exhaling a long breath through his nose.

"Are – are you all right?" Hermione asked, her voice high and tremulous, sounding not at all like herself. Ron lifted one trembling hand to dash sweat-soaked bangs out of his eyes.

"Bloody hell," he managed to gasp.

"You stupid prat!" Hermione said, but her chastising tone quickly changed into a worried one. "Ron, no! Wait a moment before getting up please." He was already struggling into a sitting position. She ascertained that he was all right, and went back to her previous tirade. "Arrogant git! Why didn't you let me Stun you?"

“Because of that,” Ron said succinctly, reclining back on his elbows and pointing at the ceiling of the tunnel, something at which he’d had a perfect look, while lying prostrate on the ground. Harry and Hermione’s gazes followed his finger in almost perfect unison.

Etched onto the ceiling, obviously done by finely-honed wandfire, was the Dark Mark.

Hermione felt her mouth grow dry, and Harry swore softly under his breath, as they both slowly stood, gripping their wands and still watching the ceiling. She saw movement out of the corner of her eye, and noted that Ron had come the rest of the way to his feet. He was standing crookedly, heavily favoring his leg.

“We’ve got to get out of here,” Harry said in a throaty whisper.

“Harry, wait,” Hermione interrupted him firmly, laying a calming hand on his sleeve. “Look how faded the etching is. It’s been there for – for probably as long as the sconce. Hang on.” She brought one hand up to her mouth, her eyes focused inward intently, furiously thinking. Finally, she looked up, raised her wand to the Mark on the wall, and said, “Tempus orti.” The beam from her wand hit the etching and the entire thing glowed blue. “Hand me the sconce.” Harry had to look for it, finally finding it where he’d dropped it when Ron collapsed and handing it off. Hermione repeated the spell on the sconce, and it also glowed blue.

“Well,” she said, tossing the sconce back toward the wall of the tunnel. “It’s not as definitive as someone skilled in archaeology spells could come up with, but it will suffice. If either were new, they would have glowed red. Blue means they’re at least a decade old, and could be as much as a half-century old.” Both boys gaped at her, and she added, a little defensively, “It’s the best I could come up with.”

“Brilliant, as always, Hermione,” Ron said reluctantly, oddly sounding a little wistful.

“I don’t like the fact that Death Eaters were ever down here at all,” Harry said, his eyes straining to pierce the darkness that lurked beyond their wandlight. “I don’t care if it was 2 days ago or 20 years ago.”

"But it makes sense," Hermione said thoughtfully, chewing on her lower lip. "This tunnel runs from Hogwarts dungeons, and that's where –"

"Slytherin is," Harry and Ron answered in perfect grim unison.

"The cave-in must have ruined everything," Harry continued. "Think about how many Death Eaters-in-training must have snuck out of Hogwarts for their little meetings."

"And if it's the only passage the Slytherins knew about," Hermione mused, "it explains why Malfoy had to use those Vanishing cabinets to let the Death Eaters in, sixth year."

"Slytherins always did have their heads stuck up their own arses," Ron grumbled, obviously thinking of the myriad of secret pathways found on the Marauder's Map. They began to walk, keeping by unspoken consent to the shadows of the curving walls, speaking in hushed tones.

"The question is whether or not the Death Eaters still use it," Harry pointed out, his eyes going to the lurking darkness ahead of their light.

"Why would they?" Ron asked. "It doesn't go anywhere."

"The rocks in the cave-in haven't been moved, that much is obvious," Hermione agreed in her most logical voice.

"So?" Harry countered. "The tunnel entrance is obviously concealed well, or the Marauders would have found it. It's far enough from Hogwarts to not attract attention. Why not continue to use it as some kind of meeting place?" As he finished his statement, something crunched beneath the sole of his shoe. All three jumped, and Harry cautiously lifted his foot to see what he'd stepped on. He knelt to brush the dirt away, carefully exposing the fragments, and could see the silvery sheen of the remnants of a sticking charm.

"It's a badge," Hermione breathed. Harry lifted it carefully, and the silver backing flaked off into the dirt, as he turned it over. The top

was mostly intact, and proclaimed Italia! across the top. In the center was a faded Quidditch logo that looked like a broom superimposed over an eagle and a Roman gladius. The bottom had caught the brunt of Harry's heel and was crushed into near oblivion. It said "World Cup 199 –". The last digit was gone, but the Trio exchanged anxious glances, as they tried to digest what exactly that badge would mean. Ron swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing visibly in his throat, and Hermione watched him readjust his grip on his wand.

"Care to ... re-evaluate your hypothesis, Hermione?" Harry asked hoarsely, but in a voice of worry rather than recrimination.

"Maybe...maybe since they've got Hogwarts, they don't need this place anymore," Ron suggested hopefully. Harry stood up, tilting his open palm so that the pieces fell back to the earth with a soft tinkle, the word Italia fragmenting on impact. He took a deep breath, as he looked at his two best friends.

"Maybe we should Disillusion ourselves," he suggested heavily, and Hermione felt herself nodding, as Ron readily agreed. To her surprise, Harry attempted to do the charm on himself, and did a creditable job, though Hermione had to touch it up a bit. She could, by his faint outline, seen only because she knew where he was standing, that he was not pleased with the outcome, probably thinking that there wouldn't be anyone to "tweak" his hexes in battle.

They proceeded cautiously down the tunnel, Harry and Hermione moving along one wall, and Ron in the arching shadow of the other. Every now and then, they would pause, hovering, waiting, listening. The darkness ahead of them – they couldn't risk movement without wandlight – seemed to surge and ebb; it seemed to whisper and mock, taunting them, as if it knew what lay ahead and they did not. Hermione felt fingers of fear shiver up her back. There were no sounds save for the soft pad of their footfalls on the tunnel floor.

Hermione felt her pace slowing again, and she felt irritation at herself, at her own weakness. Ron and Harry were a couple of paces ahead of her, on opposite walls, and even if the situation hadn't been so inherently tense, she didn't think that they would have been talking. There was still much to be worked through, especially for Ron,

though it held true for all three of them. Hermione thought that it was almost nice to be working as a team again, focusing on outcome, rather than emotional strain. She hesitated to rub at her shoulder, which seemed to be knotting up tighter than ever, while Ron and Harry continued on, unaware that she had lagged behind. They had only gone a step or two when Hermione started, having seen a sort of shimmer ahead, like distant lightning or perhaps Muggle camera flash. She opened her mouth to call out a warning, and just that quickly, before she could even force sound between her lips...

They were gone.

She stood motionless in the tunnel for the space of a heartbeat or two, her mouth hanging open. She was still Disillusioned, still held her lit wand in one fist, and she was utterly alone. She felt a tremble run rampantly over her body, and her eyes filled up with tears, blurring her vision.

Stop, stop, stop, stop it, Hermione! She ordered herself sternly, stubbornly blinking back tears. Pull yourself together. What exactly happened? What did you see? She paused, putting one foot carefully in front of the other, almost heel to toe, edging more closely to the area where they'd vanished. Something shimmered, and then they disappeared. There had been a faint noise, a momentary low-level buzz, like the hum of electric current. Current? Not possible, she mused, but her eyes went to the periphery of the tunnel anyway, carefully scanning the walls, ceiling, and floor. Heel-toe, she moved a little closer, the silence pressing in on her, trying her best to suppress the panic that wanted to surge over her and overwhelm her.

Then she saw it.

There was a small metallic looking box, affixed to the wall, perhaps about ankle high. They might have passed by it without seeing it at all. It did not appear to be a Muggle device, and didn't seemed to be connected to any wiring or plugs. A small green indicator blinked serenely, and another indicator, possibly red or black, was unlit. She tapped it experimentally with her wand, and it vibrated slightly. Sticking charm, she ascertained. Well, that's one question answered.

She considered dismantling it or turning it off, but didn't want to risk losing Harry and Ron forever to... wherever they'd gone.

She slid forward another pace, and slowly extended her arm, so slowly that she could practically feel each muscle fiber stretching. With one arm out, she continued to move, almost infinitesimally, and then she felt a thrum of power, the faint buzz reaching her ears again. It was harder to see with a Disillusionment charm active, but she was able to tell that her arm was no longer visible past her wrist. She jerked her gaze back over her shoulder to see that the green indicator had ceased blinking and was now solidly lit.

She pulled her arm back and heard the crackle again. She held her arm up and examined the limb closely; it appeared to be unscathed. Another glance back at the metal box told her that the green light had resumed its intermittent pattern.

What in the world is going on here?

She took a deep breath, as if preparing to plunge under water, and leaned forward, thrusting her head and neck toward the same spot toward which her hand had gone. A low-level hum rippled around her; she felt as if she was piercing some sort of membrane, and then she opened her eyes and looked.

It appeared to be somewhere rather nondescript. The floors and walls were gray stone, dimly illuminated by a light source that flickered somewhere out of her field of vision. There was a hint of damp in the air, and the pungency made her nostrils flare. She seemed to be leaning into a corridor, which vanished out of sight around a corner a few meters away. Directly across from her, there was a weathered wooden door with a heavy metal handle.

Harry and Ron were not in sight. She leaned further forward and listened intently. There were no sounds of conflict or pursuit – no sounds of anything really, save a distant drip of water. She opened her mouth to call Harry's name, but was afraid to make that kind of identifying sound, that could put not only herself, but Harry and Ron in danger.

It had probably only been a minute, perhaps a minute and a half, since they'd disappeared, and it already felt like years. She pulled her head away from the invisible field, and looked forlornly around the silent dimness of the tunnel, which seemed more foreboding now than ever.

Why would anybody put something like this in the middle of a tunnel leading to nowhere anyway? Especially something that sent you to a horrid, damp place that smelled like Potions, and... she stopped suddenly, realizing what she had just said, realizing what she had recognized on a subconscious level... Potions.

The gray stone place was the Hogwarts dungeon, and Hogwarts was crawling with Death Eaters.

She hurtled through the invisible barrier so quickly that she didn't even recognize what she was doing until she had done it. She was standing in the lonely looking corridor that she had glimpsed earlier. In somewhat of a frenzy, she turned back to see where she had come, and saw only blank, gray stone.

It was a blind corridor that went nowhere. She wasn't exactly sure what she'd been planning on doing next – (where the hell are Harry and Ron?) – but all thought of fight or flight fled when she saw the metal box gleaming on the adjacent wall, green light blinking placidly. Keeping one wary eye on the corner ahead, half-expecting some bloodthirsty Dark wizards in capes to come barreling around it, she reached behind her toward the wall, less than a half-meter away. A triumphant smile crossed her face when she felt the familiar surge run up her arm. The indicator on the small box glowed a vivid solid green.

It's two-way, she thought with relief. Thank Merlin.

She moved cautiously toward the corner, watching the door warily as she did so. The handle was grimy, and the upper corners were festooned with cobwebs, so it didn't appear to have been recently used, but one could never be too careful. Her progress was intermittent; she kept stopping to listen, unable to comprehend the pervasive silence, broken only by the distant dripping.

It's just like those prats to go running off half-cocked. Where the hell – ? That train of thought was derailed abruptly, as the two objects of her wrathful worry suddenly appeared, returning from the other direction around the corner that she was approaching.

"Hermione!" Harry hissed, speaking in a loud whisper. "This is Hogwarts!"

"I know it is, you idiot," she responded in kind. "You nearly gave me a coronary. Why on earth would you go running off like that?"

"Keep your shirt on, Hermione," Ron said, in just the right sort of tone to annoy her further. "We were seeing if we could get to the secret passage down here, but there are a couple of guards down by the Potions classroom. We figured it would be wisest to get out of here quickly."

"Did you ever think to try to go back the way you came?" was her scathing retort. The boys looked shamefaced.

"But, there's nothing there..." Ron tried feebly, gesturing toward the featureless wall.

"That is powering what brought us here," Hermione said succinctly, pointing at the box with its blinking green light. "It works both ways. I checked. They've made some kind of stationary automatic portkey."

"You figured that out in two minutes?" Ron's voice was incredulous and frankly admiring, and Hermione let a small smile of triumph briefly light her face.

"But we can't go back," Harry protested. "We can't go any further down the tunnel; we'll just end up back here, or we'll have to turn around and go back to the lake." Hermione saw Ron's face pale at the thought of facing a frenzy of grindylows again.

"Better grindylows than Death Eaters," the lanky redhead managed to say.

“I think we can turn it off. See that other light?” Hermione pointed toward the box with her wand. “I’d say that it probably comes on when the field is not active.”

“So when the light is red, I could go over and touch that wall, rather than be transported back to the tunnel?” Harry posited. “And if we deactivate the one in the tunnel, we can keep going, rather than end up here?”

“I think so,” Hermione said earnestly, nodding. Her thin outline rippled like the surface of a pond being disturbed by a thrown pebble.

“Let’s go then,” Harry said heavily. They turned toward the empty wall, and were heading for the invisible field that would take them back to the tunnel, when they heard it.

“H – Harry? Hermione? Is that you?” The voice was faint, hoarse and raspy with disuse, and was coming from the battered wooden door directly opposite. Hermione did not have to have a clear view of the boys’ faces to know that their expressions mirrored her own.

“Sweet Merlin,” Ron exclaimed under his breath.

“Neville?” Harry wondered.

“Harry, we should go,” Hermione said urgently, pulling on his sleeve.

“We can’t leave him here!” Harry said in an appalled voice, and Hermione felt a little ashamed. She couldn’t help thinking, If we get caught and Harry dies, I’ll be lost – we’ll all be lost. Almost immediately on the heels of that thought came one in Harry’s voice, Sentiment is what keeps us from being Death Eaters. It was a conflict that she wasn’t sure she had the wherewithal to resolve.

“There could be wards up...” she whispered faintly. “If they find us...”

“She does have a point, you know,” Ron put in.

“If they find us, we’ll still be only a few meters away from an escape route,” Harry said emphatically, sweeping his arm back toward the

dead end. "Once we're through, we can destroy it, and they'll be cut off."

"You think they won't head for that tunnel with best possible speed?"

"Then we'll just have to hurry, won't we?" Harry responded icily. Without waiting for another answer, he strode to the door, and placed both palms on it. He appeared to be listening intently, and Hermione wondered if he was trying to sense the magic emanating from it, as Dumbledore had when they went looking for the locket horcrux. After a moment, he turned back toward them, "I think there's a ward up, but I'm not sure." His voice sounded apologetic and frustrated, his newly emerging magic evidently still moving too slowly for him. "Can you dismantle it?" he directed this question at Hermione.

"Blind?" Hermione sounded worried. Their ward detectors were back at the cave. "I don't know if it's a detection ward, or a occupancy ward, or –"

"Hermione, just try!" Harry's voice was rough. "There's not a lot of time." Anger licked at her like rising tongues of flame. How can he be so cavalier about his life? She thought with irritation, noting that Ron had sidled toward the next corner, intent on watching for approaching Death Eaters. She furrowed her brow, and turned her concentration toward the door.

After a moment that seemed to last a lifetime, she had undone the ward, and a soft,

"Alohamora," opened the door. Her eyes strained to adjust to the dimness, as she peered into the shadowy depths. "Neville?" she called out, hesitantly.

"Hermione?" cracked the voice again. "Oh, Merlin, is it really you?" She could just make out an uneven lump hunched against one of the walls. It was intolerably damp; there were even a few puddles on the floor, and moisture dripped from the walls. A small clump of something similar to her bluebell flames hovered in an upper corner, providing the only light in the room, which wasn't much. The smell

was horrific. She tapped herself on her head with her wand, allowing the Disillusionment to flicker briefly, so that he could see her.

“Sme, Neville. Are you tied up?” she asked.

“No, I’m – I’m okay,” he faltered, and the shape moved, as he tried to stand, hampered by a sudden racking cough.

“Wait!” Harry’s voice rang out suddenly, seeming overloud in the oppressive quiet. “How do we know it’s Neville?”

“Harry, we saw him on the Map,” Hermione said, speaking calmly. She remembered feeling this way the last times she was in a cell under Voldemort’s control. Hurry, hurry, hurry.

“Who Petrified you during second year?” Harry asked abruptly. Neville had shuffled closer to the door, and in the slightly less dim light from the corridor, they could see that he was in terrible condition, not from torture or the like, but seemingly from neglect. His hair hung in his eyes, limp and greasy, and his clothes were caked in dirt. There was a distinct stench to him, and Hermione could not help but recoil slightly, though she tried to cover it up.

“It was first year, and Hermione did,” Neville answered, looking clearly toward Harry, without hesitation.

“What kind of plant did you have – that you used to talk to like it was a pet?” he pressed.

“Harry, we don’t have time for this!” Hermione hissed shrilly. Neville cracked a wan smile.

“The one that exploded all over you on the Hogwarts Express?” he queried. “That was a Mimulus Mibletonia.” Hermione was impatiently cutting her eyes back and forth between Harry and Neville.

“Are you quite finished?” she asked snippily. “Take Neville and go on, Harry. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Like hell I will,” Harry declared, looking incensed. Hermione’s lips thinned, but she betrayed no other sign of ire.

“Harry, do you not understand that you absolutely cannot be caught here? I’m going to transfigure something to resemble Neville. Maybe it’ll be awhile before they realize he’s not here. I’ll be right behind you,” she over-enunciated the last sentence. “Now, go.” She sort of shoved Neville towards Harry, so that he was forced to support the emaciated and ill-looking boy, who, due to the Disillusionment, could barely see who was helping him stand.

As they emerged from the cell, with Neville blinking against the light, Harry looked anxiously toward the exposure of the hallway. Ron could barely be made out in the flickering light at the far corner, keeping watch. When he saw Neville emerge and pause, assuming that Harry was questioning whether it was safe, he motioned with his head for them to go on.

“Where are we going?” Hermione heard Neville ask in bewilderment, as he and Harry headed down a dead-end corridor. She turned back to Neville’s cell, her heart pounding in her ears, and her hands trembling so badly that she thought she might drop her wand. She knew that if any of them were found down here, it would go very, very badly. Quickly, she forced her mind to the task at hand, and surveyed the contents of the cell. A rusted bedstead stood in a corner, with a tattered, stained mattress and a moth-eaten old blanket tossed carelessly atop it. A bucket stood at the farthest point in the cell, near a pile of moldy straw. The air was chill and moist, and the smell was nearly overpowering. Hermione felt her eyes water.

She marched over to the bed, and crumpled the threadbare blanket into a wadded ball, holding it tightly in one hand, and pointing her wand at it with the other.

“Homo simulo,” she said carefully, and tossed the blanket onto the bed. Before it landed, it had morphed into the vague shape of a human body, curled up in sleep. She waved her wand, adding a sloppy thatch of dark hair where the head would be, and adding shadow and dull color to resemble clothing. The original color of Neville’s clothes had been impossible to discern beneath the grime,

and she figure that the Death Eaters probably hadn't noticed either. Carefully, she walked to the doorway to survey her handiwork, and then shook her head. It needs to be covered, and I've just used the blanket. Trying to force her movements to stay calm and efficient, she turned her wand on her sleeve, using a quiet diffindo to separate it from the main body of the garment.

"Hermione, we should go. I think I hear voices," came Ron's own low voice, anxiously from the doorway.

"You think you hear voices?" she retorted acerbically, nerves making her voice sharper than it would have been normally.

"There's water running somewhere, and it's hard to be sure, but – but we've been here long enough and –"

"Give me one more second. Why don't you go on?"

"Not likely," Ron snorted. "Let's go." She saw the air ripple vaguely, as he leaned against the doorway, and she sniffed disdainfully.

"Prat," she muttered under her breath, before saying, "Engorgio," while directing her wand at her sleeve. The sleeve swelled out until it was the size of a small area rug.

"Hermione!" Ron's voice sounded panicky, and Hermione paused. She could hear them too, an indistinct murmur, partially obscured by the dripping water. She hastily spread the blanket out over the Neville-shape, and followed Ron out of the door, shutting it quietly behind her. The voices were nearer now, much nearer, and Hermione thought she could see their shadows preceding them on the wall; they would be around the corner soon, and she wasn't sure their Disillusion would be enough to completely conceal them if they were seen in the middle of an open hallway.

Hermione and Ron plunged toward the blind corridor, moving quietly, but as fast as they dared. Ron's breath seemed to puff very loudly from his nostrils, and she could tell that he was in pain. They were about halfway to their goal, when Hermione stopped suddenly, alarm flooding her. She looked wide-eyed at Ron, and mouthed the words,

"I didn't lock the door!" Ron shook his head furiously. It doesn't matter now. She mimed pushing him towards the field, and inclined her head back toward the door. I'll lock it. They can't know anyone was down here. Go on.

Ron actually opened his mouth to argue with her, and she shoved him with the flats of both hands, as hard as she could, hoping he wouldn't further injure his leg, as he careened through the field, and vanished with a barely discernible crackle. She darted back to the junction of the two hallways, and peered slowly around the concealing corner.

Two Death Eaters stood just out of sight around the far corner. She could see the hem of one's robes, and she could hear two low voices.

"... we gotta come down 'ere anyways?" one was whining. "There ain't anyone unauthorized down 'ere, and no ways to get anywhere either."

"The Dark Lord says to check on the prisoner, we check on the prisoner," the second one said lazily. His voice was more carefully modulated, and sounded more educated than the first.

"Damn cold down here... and wet. The Dark Lord di'nt say to, bloody Lucius Malfoy said to, an' I don't see why – "

"Hold your tongue, you fool," the second one hushed him. Hermione swallowed painfully, and aimed her wand at the doorway, hoping that they wouldn't notice the spell as it whisked across the hallway.

"The Dark Lord order just kill 'im. Worthless sprog di'nt even put up much of a fight. He ain't worth our trouble," she heard the complaining one say.

"Colloportus," she whispered, barely audibly. The spell hit true, and the resultant squelchy click of the lock sounded impossible loud, and drowned out the first part of what the second Death Eater said.

“... part of Harry Potter’s inner circle. The Dark Lord must think that Potter will come after him.”

“Djou hear somethin’?” the first man interrupted, and Hermione felt her blood freeze. There was a moment of complete silence, wherein she was absolutely certain that her heart stopped beating.

“Hey!” the first one called out loudly. “Hey, Lon’bottom!” When there was no response, he shouted louder. “Wake up, you pathetic little blood traitor!” Footsteps began to sound, and Hermione knew that at least one of them had to have rounded the first corner. Throwing caution to the wind, she began a lunge toward the field, but then her own healing, fatigued muscles betrayed her. A spasm ran up her back and across her shoulder, her arm folding up towards her body as if it had a life of its own. She curled up, instinctively trying to draw in to relieve the tension, and she fell. She saw the gray stones pass in front of her eyes, as she plummeted downward for what seemed like forever. Her breath left her lungs audibly, when she hit the floor, fearing to catch herself and risk any other unnecessary noise or movement. She lay against the wall, one arm outflung, trying desperately to catch her breath. Her shoulder throbbed.

She had just begun thinking about attempting to rise, when the noisy rattle of a door handle startled her. Not daring to move, she rolled her eyes upward, to see both Death Eaters standing just a meter or two away at Neville’s door. The first one had cast Fenestra on the door, and was peering inside.

“E’s sleepin’,” the first Death Eater proclaimed. “Ere now, look lively! You’ll have loads o’ time to sleep when the Dark Lord puts yer head on a pike!” He took aim with his wand through the clear panel, and looked at the second guard with surprise, when an iron hand closed around his wrist.

“Leave him alone,” the second one said. “The state he’s in, one curse could kill him. And then Lucius Malfoy would likely kill you... painfully.” Hermione’s mind raced; Voldemort had some kind of plan for Neville – but what? Her panicked heart rate had slowed some; soon the Death Eaters would be gone back around the corner, and she could get up and go back to the tunnel.

Then, to her horror, the second Death Eater turned down the hallway, passing very close to her. She saw his eyes flicker around the perimeter of the corridor, perhaps looking for the metallic box. She hoped he wouldn't look down, or that she would be concealed in the shadows of his billowing cloak.

He stepped on her fingers. Through his heavy sole, it was unlikely that he'd even noticed that he stepped on anything, but Hermione could feel the tears spring to her eyes, as she heard bone crack. To her, it rang out as loudly as snapping tree limbs, but he did not appear to hear. The pain in her hand was white-hot, and she felt her teeth clamp down on her lip. Do not make a sound. Blood was trickling saltily into her mouth, where she'd bitten her lip.

An instant later, he had moved, kneeling at the end of the corridor, to investigate the metal box. Its green light blinked calmly, and the Death Eater appeared to be pleased. Hermione's vision was blurred from tears, and she tried furiously to get air back into her lungs without gasping out loud.

"Everything's in order here," he said to his companion, who was still waiting by Neville's door, which was once again solid. "Let's go." Their footsteps faded into the distance, until the persistent drip of water was the only sound.

Even that sound was nearly obscured by the roaring in Hermione's ears. She wasn't sure how long she had laid there – though it couldn't have been long, or the others surely would have burst back through the barrier, wands blazing – before she tried to get up, a cumbersome task in itself. Her head swam, as she pulled herself up, using the stones of the wall, leaving her injured hand cradled protectively into the curve of her torso. Every muscle in her body shrieked in protest, and she felt black fingers encroaching on the edge of her vision. She staggered unevenly toward the field.

Five more steps...four more steps... Someone's arm was already her, holding her up. Someone's voice was soothing, telling her that everything was going to be fine. They were lined up with the metallic

box now...one more step... She felt the thrum of the field as she passed through it.

The first thing she noticed when she stepped back into the tunnel was that Harry was leaning against one smooth, curved wall, struggling against what looked like invisible bonds. He was red in the face, cursing violently, and clearly furious.

“Let me go, Ron, or I swear by all that’s holy that I’ll – ” Hermione felt Ron’s arm drop away from around her, and he pointed his wand at Harry, muttering the counterspell under his breath.

As soon as the binding dropped, Harry sprang at Ron, getting in a couple of good punches before Hermione sent stinging hexes at both of them, sending them scattering in opposite directions.

“Stop it!” she said emphatically, nearly shouting. “What in the name of Merlin is wrong with the two of you?” Neville was watching the scene unfold with wide eyes.

“He tied me up! You weren’t back, and he tied me up!” Harry was still spitting mad. Hermione interposed herself carefully between them, trying her best to tamp down the searing pain in her hand. Ron came gingerly to his feet, one hand pressed to the red mark on his jaw. He didn’t look any happier with Harry than she was, but there was a strange aura of understanding in his eyes when he looked at his dark-haired best mate.

“He did the right thing!” Hermione challenged. “Either one of us is more expendable than you are.”

“Not to me! Hermione, you nearly – ” Harry was furious, shaking, as he pulled her closer to him, and looked like he didn’t know whether to kiss her or throttle her. He stopped suddenly, looked down at her cupped hand, her swollen fingers, and stated the obvious. “You’re hurt.”

“Death Eater ... stepped on my hand,” she said, forcing the words, through the waves of pain that surged up anew, reclaiming her attention. She saw Harry blanch at the thought of Death Eaters being close enough to her to step on her, how near she had come to

discovery evidently scaring him to death. Her eyes fell on the metallic box. "We should turn that off. How – how often do patrols come round?" she asked Neville.

"I'm not sure," Neville stammered hesitantly. "They made their presence known once every couple of days, but they could have been coming more often than that. A house elf brought me food and water every other day or so... if they remembered to send him."

"When – when the Death Eaters left, they thought everything was fine. They – they checked on Neville and the metallic box." Hermione closed her eyes, struggling to think straight. "We may have a couple of days, before they figure out something's not right." She swayed visibly on her feet, and felt comforting warmth as Harry put one arm around her shoulders carefully. "If we turn off the box, then when they do come this way, they won't be able to get into the tunnel... they'll have to go the long way round."

"Which means we'll have to get out of here, before they come in," Ron pointed out, gesturing toward the segment of tunnel that they had not yet traversed, and Hermione nodded with difficulty.

"Hermione," Harry's voice intruded into her whirling thoughts, slightly hazy with pain. "Hermione, let me see your hand." She was staring at the wall, where the box was affixed.

"We could make it look like it was damaged in a rock slide, a partial cave-in," she said, slight excitement tingeing her voice. "They might not ever realize we were here at all; they – they might think it was an accident."

"Let me see your hand," Harry said again, and she looked at him with some surprise. He was angry with her, and it was irritating. She held out her hand, extending her finger with difficulty. Three of them were starting to swell badly.

"I don't see what you're so worked up over," she said snippily. "I'm here, aren't I? I got out all right."

“You were close enough to Death Eaters for one of them to step on your hand,” Harry said in a tone of disbelief. “You made me leave you there! Ron tied me up! And you were in Hogwarts dungeons with Death Eaters bloody well walking on you!”

“Do you have any idea what would have happened if you’d been caught there?” Hermione shot back, now as angry as he, the throbbing in her hand sublimated beneath her own ire. “Voldemort would have killed you, and it would all be over. Over. Do you understand what that means?”

“Do you really think I don’t?” Harry snapped. “If anything happened to you, it would all be over for me anyway. Your life means more to me...than – than anything.” Hermione was shaking her head sadly.

“Give me your hand,” Ron broke in abruptly. She felt his warm fingers around hers, and faintly felt the aching ebb, as he cast a Suppression spell. There was a rush of cool air to her skin, as she lost her other sleeve, and he used it to splint her fingers tightly together. “I’ll let Madam Pomfrey handle the bone fusion charms, unless you want to cast it on yourself. Although, speaking from personal experience, I wouldn’t advise it.” She registered enough of what he said to cast a suspicious look at him, but he was already stepping away from her, moving a discreet distance away with Neville, so that she and Harry could finish their discussion.

“It can’t mean more than anything,” Hermione said softly. “Because your life means everything to everybody else. They’re counting on you.”

“That doesn’t mean anyone else should sacrifice themselves for me,” he said stubbornly, his eyes flickering with pain, as he thought of his parents, Sirius, Dumbledore, and the countless others who’d died in the first massive day of fighting.

“Yes, it does,” she insisted. “If you – if something happened to you, it would mean that everyone who has died so far, died for nothing. If I let something happen to you, it means that I’ve failed you, failed everyone.”

“And we all know that failure is something you’ve got to avoid at all costs,” Harry snapped, rather nastily. Hermione flinched a little, and Harry’s eyes softened somewhat.

“It’s not the failing part I’m worried about, it’s you,” Hermione said. “Our job – the Order’s job – is to keep you alive until Voldemort is defeated – to do everything we can to facilitate that outcome. You’ve got to let us do that job.”

“They can’t ask me to give you up,” he said, and his voice cracked. Hermione saw a slight red tint creep into his face, self-consciously.

“There may come a time when you don’t have a choice,” Hermione said matter-of-factly, her anger forgotten, looking into his anguished green eyes. “Can you deal with that?” There was a long, thick moment, where they just gazed at each other. Somehow his hands had come up to snarl in her hair.

“I – I don’t know...” Harry said honestly, in a ragged voice.

“Harry – ” There was a pleading note in her voice; she was not happy with his answer.

“I’m – I’m telling you the truth, Hermione...I just don’t know. Can we leave it at that for now?”

“As much as I love having a front-row seat to your marital spat, can we please get away from the Death Eaters little secret portal?” Ron’s voice cut in. Nobody missed Neville’s odd noise at the word ‘marital’, but nobody bothered to explain either. Hermione’s eyes slid shut for a moment, and she steeled herself mentally, pushing away her worry and irritation and guilt over Harry, and turning to the task before them.

“Finite incantatem,” she said decisively. There was a faint shimmer and crackle, and the light on the little readout turned a dark red.

“Is it off now?” Ron asked, looking dubiously at the metallic box. Harry bent down and tossed a small rock in the direction they’d been originally headed. It landed a few meters away, making a soft clunk on the smooth earthen floor.

"We should go then," Hermione said, after a moment, taking a deep breath. "If they find Neville's missing, they'll check that field first. Or if they see that the light's turned red, they may check on it sooner. And that means they'll come here."

"Are you all right?" Harry interrupted.

"Harry, I'm fine," she said, half-impatiently and half-sympathetically. He cut a strip from the hem of his own shirt, using diffindo as neatly as anyone could, and looped the material around her wrist. He pulled the ends of the fabric over one shoulder, and lifted her hair over the other shoulder so he could tie the makeshift sling at the nape of her neck. Her fingers were cradled up near the opposite collarbone, and the throbbing seemed to ease somewhat. She shivered when she felt his fingers and his breath lightly brush the skin.

"How is that?" he whispered.

"Better," she whispered back, looking over her shoulder at him with limpid eyes.

"I'm sorry for getting upset. I was scared," he admitted softly.

"So was I," she said, very low. It was enough for now. Their lips hovered a hairsbreadth apart, but they slowly moved away from each other, promising later with their eyes.

The little group began to move on down the tunnel, but Hermione turned back to the metallic box, one last time, looking at it longingly. She raised her wand abruptly, as she came to a decision.

"Alohamora," she said, causing the other three to look at her strangely. The tiny catch on the box snapped up, and the front face of it swung open on a hinge. Several spells and charms swirled around inside, in a myriad of pulsating color, though inactivated by Hermione's finite spell. "I need a vial," she cried, and Harry and Ron moved instantly into action, Ron picking up the small stone that Harry had tossed earlier, and Harry transfiguring it into a somewhat misshapen glass jar, complete with stopper.

“Not bad, Harry!” Ron exclaimed, before remembering that things were supposed to be stilted and awkward between them. Hermione dislodged the charms from within the box, and had them hovering, waiting for the jar. When Harry proffered it to her, she neatly directed them inside, sealed it, shrunk it, and handed it back to Harry, who tucked it into his zipped pocket, alongside Dennis Creevey’s lost keyfob.

When that was done, Hermione closed the face of the box, lowered the latch into place, and then charmed the red indicator alight. An incantation of *Solvare* aimed at the box undid one corner of the sticking charm, causing it to hang crookedly. Another loosening charm aimed slightly higher caused dirt to cascade from the wall, piling in a great coned mound to nearly cover the box. It looked as if it had been damaged in a minor slide. Perfect, she thought triumphantly, and it almost made up for her pain and fatigue. With any luck, this would further delay the Death Eaters in any subsequent hunt for them. She looked at her three companions and smiled.

“Let’s go,” she said.

TBC

I hope you liked this chapter. I had slightly fewer reviews for the last chapter, and I hope I’m not losing too many readers by the story getting so long (or God forbid, uninteresting). We are getting closer to the end; I would be surprised if there were more than 24 or 25 chapters – and there could be fewer than that. Hang in there – and let me know what you think!

Lorien

Chapter Twenty: Circle

Harry and Hermione both peered around the corner, blinking their unaccustomed eyes at the low light filtering in. It seemed to be late afternoon – though it felt like they'd been down in the tunnel for years – and the light was strangely green. Hermione realized that there seemed to be a healthy screen of vegetation over the flat rectangular opening.

Their going had been slow, necessarily so to accommodate Neville and Ron, but they had encountered no signs of anything amiss. The earth had grown loose and crumbly, and old footprints were clearly visible here and there and sometimes jumbled together. Hermione had been carefully erasing theirs as they made their way down the length of the passageway.

"Send out the detection charm," Harry suggested, his breath warm in her ear with the low whisper.

"If there are Death Eaters out there, they'll see it," she countered.

"Better that than one of them blasting the tops of our heads off when we poke them out of that hole," he said in a sort of muddled way. Hermione lifted one shoulder in the concession that he was probably right, and sent the white spark racing down the tunnel. It disappeared with a soft rustle through the leaves, and, in a moment, had flung itself back into the tip of Hermione's wand. Harry looked at her, with a clear question in his eyes. She shook her head.

"No one's out there," she said. Harry nodded in a business-like way.

"Good. Then we just have to figure out where we are, and how to get back to the cave," he said, and thrust himself away from the wall, proceeding around the corner toward the shaft of light.

The opening was no more than a stone sill at chest height, with the roof of the tunnel crouching low over it, leaving no more room than was necessary for one to scramble out in a ungainly squatting position. Harry figured that with the thick tangle of hanging vines and

underbrush over it, it would be very nearly invisible to the observer's eye.

Hermione was eying the obstacle with askance.

"Well, we can't Banish it, or blast our way through it either, because someone will notice," she remarked.

"P'raps it really has been a long time since anyone was down here," Harry suggested lightly.

"Maybe," Hermione conceded doubtfully. "But this feels staged to me. This barrier was put here – it didn't happen naturally."

"Well, how do you think they get in without trampling all over everything then?" he asked. Ron's eyes lit up, and he raised his wand before Harry or Hermione could tell him to stop.

"Wingardium Leviosa," he said, and the vines gracefully lifted upwards, cinching themselves like miniature, living theater curtains. Harry and Hermione exchanged bemused glances, while Ron chortled quietly, pleased with himself.

The sill was placed just high enough to make climbing out difficult, but not impossible, and Harry struggled for a moment for enough purchase to clamber up, then giving a hand up to Hermione, who had to manage using only one arm. Still crouching in the shadow of the overhang, they beheld a serene green glade, tinted gold by the low light of the setting sun, and almost completely surrounded by trees.

Other than a few random noises from forest life, there was no sound. Hermione let out a breath that she didn't know she'd been holding, as Harry turned to help Ron and Neville out.

"Point Me," Hermione whispered, laying her wand on her open palm. She watched it as it spun for a moment, stopping at true North. She could just see the glint of the Lake through the trees, the surface of the water diamond bright from the sun, and knew that Hogwarts' turrets would be just beyond. The three boys were watching her, waiting for her direction.

“That way,” she said. “We need to stay out of sight in the forest, but keep the lake on our right hand. I’m not sure how far away we are from the lagoon, but it can’t be more than a couple of kilometers.” Ron’s eyes were roving the dimness of the forest, and Harry readjusted his grip on his wand.

“Neville should go in the middle, since he’s unarmed,” Harry pointed out, and Hermione nodded her ready agreement, further annoying Harry by insisting that she and Ron take point and rear guard, since his magic was not yet at full capacity. He sullenly joined Neville in the middle of the formation, and Hermione heard him whisper to what had obviously been a wordless question from Neville,

“It’s a long story.”

They made their way through the forest, slowly and silently, as the shadows began to slant longer and lower. Hermione was periodically sending out detection charms, and they had all come back clear, but the tension was starting to manifest itself in the tightened muscles of her neck. As they entered a small clearing, she paused to work out a kink with her fingers.

When she moved forward again, something crunched noisily beneath her foot.

All four of them froze, as the sound seemed as loud as a thunderclap in the stillness of the woods. Hermione carefully lifted her shoe to see slivers of glass sparkling gold in the dying sunlight.

“What is it?” She heard Harry’s hoarse whisper behind her.

“An amphora,” she hissed back, recognizing the discarded stopper that lay a short distance away, undamaged. “Who would have a potion way out here in the middle of nowhere?”

“Her...mione?” The word was a nervous question from Ron, and she looked up to see his eyes flitting anxiously around the clearing. The trepidation on his face drew her gaze to follow his.

The clearing was a perfect circle, and had been kept clear of all underbrush. It definitely indicated, much as the veil of vines over the tunnel entrance had, that this was done by magic. Even the tree limbs were cut back, so that a circular window of sky winked down at them. The soft green surface underfoot was marred only by a blackened mark in the center, as if someone habitually had a fire there. There were some ominous looking stains splattered on some of the surrounding tree trunks.

Ron’s face had turned an ashy gray, and one hand stole to his side. Neville’s eyes were wide with alarm. Hermione and Harry exchanged glances, each uncomfortably aware of a lingering malevolence in the air, but unable to pinpoint the nuances of it, not having been immersed in the wizarding world since birth.

“This is – this is – ” Ron stammered, and his voice dropped to a scant whisper, “a Witching Circle.” It was Hermione’s turn to pale; she had seen a few vague, troubling references to them when she was researching the horcruxes.

“What’s a Witching Circle?” Harry asked. A loud hoarse cry from somewhere above them suddenly made them all jump violently, and Ron rapped out an oath.

“Look there!” Neville said, pointing upward, and they raised their eyes to see a large black bird drilling them with an all too human gaze. It hopped a little on its branch, fluttered its wings and squawked again. Hermione felt chill bumps raise the hairs on her arms. It was clear that this was not an ordinary bird.

“What should we do?” she asked breathlessly, never taking her eyes off of the raven, which now seemed like a winged harbinger of doom.

“We’ve broken into the Circle,” Ron said. “They’re going to know we’re here.”

“Who? Who’s going to know?” Harry demanded, sounding strangely panicked. The portentous atmosphere here was making them all a little jumpy.

“Whoever made it,” Neville murmured, swallowing with difficulty.

“Well, there’s a likely list of suspects up there at the castle, don’t you think?” Ron asked somewhat sarcastically.

“What are they used for? And why wouldn’t there be one nearer the castle?” Harry queried. They began to sidle toward the edge of the Circle, but the bird called out such a shrieking protest that they all stopped again.

“Latitude and longitude can matter,” Hermione said. “The positions of sun, moon, and planets have to be taken into consideration too. This is probably the closest they could get. They’re very Dark magic; I haven’t seen much on them, but some common uses listed were – were blood sacrifices, ritual murder to increase magical output, r – re-animation of the dead...”

“Why are we still standing here?” Neville’s voice was nearly a plea. Harry lifted wary eyes up to the raven again.

“Don’t you get the feeling,” he said slowly, “that the second we leave, he’s going to go tell someone exactly who and where we are?” Hermione nodded slowly. Her eyes flickered meaningfully to Harry’s, and then over to the bird. Harry was closest, and had the best angle. The raven hopped in place again and cawed, obviously sensing that something was going on.

“Listen, I don’t – ” Ron began, only to be cut off by an abrupt,

“Hush, Ron,” from Hermione. She did not remove her eyes from the raven. “Are you ready, Harry?” Her mouth barely moved as she spoke. She saw his fingers flex around his wand. He nodded once, his eyes also fixed on the target. “On three, then. One...two...three!” She pushed outwardly with her magic, sending it toward him as hard as she could, as Harry raised his wand and fiercely called out,

“Stupefy!”

The bird did not drop from the tree limb as expected. Instead, there was a soft-sounding squelch, and the raven simply vanished in a puff of feathers and blood on impact with the spell. The four teenagers stood, dumbfounded, looking up as a few black tufts wafted down on the light breeze.

“Did it get away?” Neville asked, after a moment.

“No,” Hermione said faintly. “I – I think we killed it.”

“That’s nothing, Neville,” Ron said, conspiratorially, nudging his classmate in the side. “You should have seen what they did when Lupin got loose during the full moon.” Neville’s eyes got even larger than they had been before.

“This was different,” Harry interjected, his eyes still quizzically tracing a meandering path left by one of the feathers. “This was – could you feel it?”

“I felt it,” Hermione whispered hoarsely, and Neville and Ron exchanged bewildered glances. “It – it was – it’s this place... it – with Professor Lupin, it was pure adrenaline, like life or death, but this – I feel like it wanted us to – ” She shuddered, but whatever she might have continued saying was cut off, by several cracks, sounding like twigs snapping faintly in the distance. The four of them looked at each other with expressions of mingled alarm and terror.

“Somebody at the castle must have notified somebody outside,” Hermione said, her voice nearly nothing but a breathy gasp. “They’ve Apparated outside the grounds, and they’ll be coming this way! For the love of Merlin, we need to go now!”

They quickly tumbled from the Circle in an ungainly scramble, but Hermione couldn’t help but feel, even though they had blasted the infernal bird into oblivion, that sinister eyes were on them as they left. When she turned to look, just before they passed out of sight, the Circle was empty, eerily serene, and as unmarred as they’d found it, save for one long black pinfeather, exactly in the center.

Harry was the only one among them who had remained physically unscathed, but she noted that he now seemed to be moving with more difficulty than any of the other three. He appeared pale, quiet, and withdrawn, lagging behind the others, despite Hermione's hushed, but repeated pleas for him to hurry. Ron turned to look at them questioningly, but Hermione waved her hand impatiently for him and Neville to continue on, as quickly as they could. The jutting stones forming the cliff that separated the Lake from the lagoon were now in sight.

Fear was gnawing at her, and she wasn't sure if it was some kind of magical residue left from the Witching Circle, or the knowledge that Death Eaters surely hunted them not far away, or a combination of both. Her hurried stride hesitated, as she realized that Harry was no longer at her elbow.

"Harry, come on," she said, tugging on his arm, while also raising her wand covertly, cupping it in her damaged hand. Her injured fingers were screaming at her to modify her actions, but she pushed the pain to the back of her mind. She was going to have to Stun him. She couldn't explain his behavior, but there was no time to do so; Ron and Neville were already out of view.

"Expelliarmus!" came a voice, and Hermione's wand soared upwards before she could even turn toward the source. Her eyes briefly slid shut in defeat, as she turned slowly, her bandaged hand still upraised, and one hand firmly wound in the material of Harry's sleeve. Two men faced them, wearing nondescript black robes. One man – the one who had disarmed her – had the sleeves of his robes rolled up, despite the encroaching sharp chill, and the Dark Mark was clearly visible on his forearm. He had evidently been about to say something, but stopped when his eyes suddenly lit on Harry.

"Well, well, well," he remarked. "'Twould appear to be the Dark Lord's lucky day." Hermione looked at Harry, almost willing him to return her gaze. He still had his wand – they had likely only seconds before the Death Eaters realized it – and if they could do the same thing they'd done back in the Circle, they might be able to get out of this after all. She gripped his shirt sleeve tighter, twisting it around his wrist, hoping

to garner his attention without speaking; his wand was completely concealed where her body overlapped his. He wasn't looking at her; he wasn't looking at the Death Eaters, but back toward the rapidly darkening woods, where the Witching Circle lay.

Dammit, Harry! Hermione shrieked inwardly, and felt a tell-tale prickle of panicked tears stinging her eyelids. Her fingers quavered, and she hesitated for only a second before snatching his wand out of his hand. She shoved him to the ground behind her, at the same time that she raised his wand in one smooth motion. She felt perspiration break out on her forehead, and she grit her teeth when something popped in her hand as she pushed Harry down. Her set features betrayed none of the turmoil she was feeling inside, as she prayed for her desperate bid for freedom to work.

Levicorpus! She thought as intently as she knew how, and swung the first Death Eater by his ankles into the second. The response she was getting from Harry's wand was more than she could have hoped for, and the two men flew at least 20 meters in a tangle of arms and legs, hitting the trunk of a large tree with a sick-sounding thunk. She hurried across the intervening distance, and raised Harry's wand again, as she peered at the two bodies, lying entwined like discarded dolls. Thick blood had begun to trickle from the ears and nose of one, who had obviously had his skull shattered on impact with the tree, and it looked to Hermione like he was already dead.

Squelching her revulsion, she reached out two fingers and checked for a pulse. There was none. She inhaled and exhaled a deep, slow breath, and turned to the second Death Eater. He appeared to be unconscious, and she carefully lifted Harry's wand.

She hesitated, and the slender wooden shaft faltered. Just do it, Hermione. Just... Her breath came faster, hissing through flared nostrils, and the throbbing in her fingers was nearly unbearable. She wondered if she could Oblivate him instead. If it doesn't work...if Voldemort finds out that Harry was anywhere near here, they'll... She flung an anxious glance over her shoulder at Harry, who had not risen from where she'd shoved him.

A hand closed around her fingers, eliciting a shrill keen of pain from her, and she turned slowly to see malevolent eyes on her. He began to twist the injured limb, and tears of agony overflowed their bounds.

"Drop your wand," he told her succinctly, having evidently assessed her injury and determined that this would be quicker than scrambling around the corpse of his partner to find another wand, or making a possibly unsuccessful attempt at wandless magic.

"Expelliarmus!" Ron's familiar voice rang out behind her like soothing balm on her fear, and she let out a half-sob of relief. The Death Eater wasn't holding a wand, but he was holding on to her, and she shot away from him as quickly as if she'd been repelled, collapsing with a whimper as her injured arm folded up beneath her. She was still trying to get to her feet, fighting nausea, when she heard Ron say, "Sectumsempra."

She almost did throw up then, but couldn't help but recognize the necessity of his actions. I hesitated, she thought with self-loathing. I hesitated! She scrabbled across the edge of the underbrush, using both legs and one arm, to where Harry still lay.

"Harry?" she whispered, caressing his face with the tips of her fingers. "Harry, wake up!" He was breathing, but did not respond, and she was at a loss as to what had happened to him.

She finally managed to straighten up, and stood motionless for a moment, waiting for the swimming in her head to abate. When it had, she turned toward the fallen Death Eaters, and stopped abruptly when she ran into the solid wall of a chest. Harry's wand was underneath the chin of the intruder, before she even knew she'd moved her arm.

"Bloody hell, hold on, Hermione!" Ron exclaimed.

"You scared me," Hermione said fuzzily, clutching at his arm to hold herself upright.

"I can see that. What the hell happened?" He gestured toward Harry. "Did he get hit?"

“No, nothing hit him. I don’t know why he – I was disarmed, but I used his wand to...” she slowed down, wondering again at the reaction of the wand. “Damn!” she said suddenly, in remembrance, and Accio’d her own fallen wand. It flew into her hand with accurate alacrity, and even Ron looked impressed.

Hermione looked over toward the forest from which they’d just emerged. The shadows under the low-hanging limbs were very thick and dark now. Anything could be watching us, she thought forebodingly, and she felt her mind become a little clearer from fear, if nothing else.

“The Death Eaters?” she asked, and Ron’s face became very distant.

“They’re both dead,” he said.

“What happens when they find the bodies? They’ll know we were here.”

“They already know we’re here,” Ron replied, a trifle snappishly.

“They’ll know those men were murdered,” she pointed out, her eyes traveling over his shoulder to where their crumpled bodies lay. “You don’t think they’ll look for who did it?”

“What did you want me to do, Hermione?” Ron cried, sounding defensive and placating at the same time. Hermione didn’t answer him, but instead gingerly walked the distance to the corpses, looking down on them as dispassionately as she knew how.

“Evanescio,” she intoned quietly, carefully aiming Harry’s wand. The power of the white-hot lightning that surged from the wand surprised even her, and she heard Ron swearing quietly somewhere behind her. The bodies vanished, as well as the bloodstains, a good portion of the surrounding undergrowth, and the lower part of the tree trunk, which Hermione hastily replaced. She hurried back to Ron’s side, trying to ignore the pain that was now shooting all the way up her arm to her shoulder.

“Let’s go,” she said, looking forlornly at Harry’s still face and clutching both wands in her good hand, her other arm cradled protectively to her chest. Somewhere along the way, she had lost her sling, probably when reaching to pull frantically on Harry’s reluctant arm. “Where’s Neville?”

“Waiting for us down by the water,” Ron said. “I – I did the clone-detection charm like you showed me. He’s really him.” Hermione smiled a little; her focus was on her husband, but she was covertly watching Ron as he Levitated his best mate. She was nearly certain that he was more hurt than he let on; he was walking as if the muscles on one side of his torso had seized up, and he was unnaturally pale.

“Good.” Her voice remained calm, although an insidious voice deep inside her insisted that something was wrong... with Ron? Harry? With everything?

Four hasty Bubble-head charms later, and there was no sign that anyone had ever been there at all.

Fred was the first one to spot them, and he sent up a cry of surprise and happiness, when they emerged from the water. It drew the rest of the Order, but their excited, jumbled questions came to an abrupt halt when they saw the state of the exhausted and bedraggled group.

“Neville?” Luna uttered the lone pair of syllables, and, out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Ginny go suddenly rigid. Lupin, who looked fine, Hermione noticed with another distant part of her mind, and Mr. Weasley quickly shouldered in between her, Ron, and Harry, taking over the Levitation. She felt her knees buckle, but Ron caught her under her good elbow, even though she heard the hiss of pain from him as he did so.

“What’s happened to him, Hermione?” Lupin called urgently over his shoulder, as the group moved quickly into the infirmary. Ron was

trying to answer frantic questions about Neville, and someone was casting drying charms on all of them.

"I don't know," she replied, despair coloring her voice. "We – it – this bird, and the Death Eaters were – " She was feeling dizzy, light-headed, and it was difficult to think clearly. She could only assume that it was the after-effects of all they'd been through.

"Death Eaters?" Fred's voice was sharp. Harry had been deposited on a bed, and Madam Pomfrey was carefully scanning him with her wand. Hermione's eyes fastened again on his pale face.

"There was a Witching Circle out in the forest," Neville put in suddenly. "It probably wasn't even a kilometer from here."

"By the Blade," Lupin swore under his breath. "Hermione, you need to tell me exactly what happened." He moved toward her, and grasped her arm in his eagerness to know, and she was unable to stifle a cry of pain. Lupin's eyes clouded with apology. "You're hurt." She shook her head.

"It's just broken fingers...maybe my hand. It's nothing. You should really see about – "

"Ronald!" The dismayed cry came from Luna, and Hermione whirled in alarm. Ron had collapsed, one hand still cradling the curve of his ribs protectively. Penelope rushed to his aid, and she and Fleur moved him to a bed.

The younger mediwitch used Diffindo to remove Ron's shirt, after a hasty wand scan, and found the jagged slash that Hermione had healed was thickened and fiery red.

"Grindylow poison," she said grimly. "It's been sealed inside the wound. Madam Pomfrey!" The former school nurse tossed a vial of something to McGonagall, who caught it neatly, and moved to Harry's bedside, deftly switching places with Madam Pomfrey. Hermione felt herself cringing with guilt, as she remembered that she had been the one to close up Ron's wound, blithely unaware of the poison that she'd trapped inside him.

Penelope had reopened Ron's wound, and a copious amount of bloody pus began to ooze from it. Mr. Weasley and Fred stood by tensely, watching, and Ginny stood ramrod straight at the foot of his bed, fingers wound through the metal railing. Hermione let herself exhale a sigh of relief, when the pinched look left Madam Pomfrey's face and Penelope began to use a cleansing charm on the wound. Ron was still pale, but his breathing seemed to be more relaxed.

There was a lot of bustling and indiscriminate shouting, as Fred detached himself from Ron's bedside, and Levitated some additional beds from the sleeping quarters. Without really understanding how, Hermione found herself on one of those beds. Struggling to maintain her focus, she fixed her eyes on Remus.

"So, you made it out okay, then?" she asked innocuously, staring stupidly at the two wands cupped together in her hand.

"I'm fine. A few cuts and scratches, but we got away just in time, thanks to that medallion of yours," he said. She allowed a slight, self-deprecating smile to cross her face, as her gaze moved to Harry lying on the bed next to her.

"Where's Seamus? And Tonks?" Remus' eyes clouded briefly at Hermione's question. She noticed the bed at the far end, almost completely obscured by dimmed dividers, and for a paralyzing second, she feared the worst.

"Mr. Finnegan's still recovering," the werewolf answered. "One of the grindylows that got him had a poison sac behind its front claws. Some of the alpha males have them, but not all." There was chagrin in Lupin's voice. "Apparently, he and Ron both got lucky. Anyway, he's had a rough go of it, but we think he's going to be okay now. We sent Tonks with Aberforth to get the rest of Seamus' team. They know the necessary charms to perform," he added hastily, as Hermione opened her mouth to advise caution. "No one will be brought down here, unless we're absolutely sure of their identity and loyalty. But if we're going to start formulating a final plan, we're going to need all the wands we can get, and Seamus' team definitely has experience

in covert operations. They're also better able to disappear into their surroundings than we are."

"Let me see those fingers," Fleur said briskly, approaching the bedside. Hermione felt inexplicably annoyed and irritated, and snatched the broken digits away from the half-Veela.

"I'm fine," she said, absently noting that Fred had moved Neville to a bed as well, and Mr. Weasley was giving him some kind of nutrient potion under clipped instructions from McGonagall. "I need to be with Harry." She slid from the bed, gripping at the mattress, with what she hoped was a discreet gesture, in an attempt to keep herself on her feet.

"Hermione!" Fleur's voice was sweet, but her eyes flashed with silvery steel. "I assure you I am perfectly capable of performing a bone fusing charm and a basic medical wand scan. Get back on the bed, at once. I insist." Hermione looked entreatingly at Remus, who raised both hands and looked innocent, as if to say, you're on your own. She sagged back onto the mattress with defeat, sullenly holding her injured arm out to the Frenchwoman. It does hurt, she reflected reluctantly. Fleur neatly sliced the bandage that had once been her shirt sleeve and was holding her fingers tightly together, as well as the ones that had been protecting her burns.

"You were going to tell me what happened, if you can?" Lupin asked, almost tentatively. Hermione nodded slowly, and began to relate the entire story, careful to mention the odd transportation device, their unexpected trip to the dungeons in the bowels of Hogwarts, and their retrieval of Neville.

Fleur lifted both of Hermione's arms, looking critically at the mottled pink skin.

"Your burns are looking a lot better, Hermione," Fleur remarked. Self-consciousness overwhelmed Hermione, as she fought the instinctive urge to conceal the marred limbs. Her smile at Fleur was tight-lipped. There were no additional comments, and soon Hermione felt gentle pressure on her fingers, inhaling a hissing breath, as the bones knit together. Remembering Lupin's inquiry, she continued the tale,

relating all that had happened regarding the Witching Circle, Harry's odd behavior, and the subsequent arrival of Death Eaters nearby.

"That's not surprising," Lupin said. "Witching Circles are connected to the wizard or witch that created them. Voldemort would have been aware the instant anyone crossed the threshold. The mere presence of the Circle nearby could be why that passageway was still used occasionally."

"Then – then you think that Voldemort – ?" Hermione said, falteringly. Lupin shook his head slowly, appearing deep in thought, and lifted his shoulders in a shrug.

"There may not be a way to know for sure, but if it was Voldemort who created the Circle, it might explain why Harry was acting so oddly. His and Voldemort's magic has been very closely bound for a very long time."

"You don't think this caused a setback for Harry – in – in his magic, I mean?" Hermione wondered.

"Time will tell," Remus said apologetically, obviously feeling the inadequacy of his answer. The two wands in her other hand caught her attention as she lowered her gaze, and she almost immediately looked up again, startled.

"Professor Lupin!" she said suddenly. "I – I used Harry's wand. I – it was like it was my own – better than my own. It took me three or four tries to get anything out of it before, and – I didn't have any other choice when I was disarmed, but it was – it was unbelievable, the power..."

Lupin leaned on his elbows at the foot of her bed, evidently intrigued. Fleur doled out a portion of bone-setting serum, followed by some pain reliever, and Hermione took them both absently, though she was gratefully aware when the throbbing pain finally eased. She barely noticed Fleur's cool hands moving over her burns, spreading a thick layer of healing salve and winding new bandages over the coated area.

“When was the last time you tried to use it?” he asked.

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve used it since we were at the safehouse. Not since Mr. Weasley got me my new wand.” Hermione said. Fleur was waving her wand carefully up and down the length of her body, assessing any other possible injuries. A soft, whirring sound issued from her wand. “Could a – could a marriage create a – a bond that – ” Hermione asked. Lupin looked doubtful.

“It’s possible. But it’s generally hard to create those kinds of bonds unintentionally. There’s a spell, for instance, that creates a Wand Bond between the magical signatures and the life forces of two individuals. Strong feelings of love or protectiveness could facilitate the bond – make it stronger or able to be formed more easily – but it’s unlikely that it could form one on its own. Of course, since you were assisting him in his magic, channeling your magic through him, it’s possible that could have gradually made it easier for you to use his wand. It’s like the way Voldemort channeled some of his power into Harry accidentally. Their magical signatures were likely similar, and so too were their wands. If your magic has been commingling with – and maybe taking on the characteristics of – Harry’s magic, then your ability to use his wand could be heightened as well.” Hermione’s mouth opened in a round “o” of surprise, as she thought through all the ramifications of what Lupin had said.

“What would happen if Harry and I made a Wand Bond? Would that help him?” she asked. Lupin looked at her dubiously, but her pleading eyes locked on his face, until he offered an answer.

“Both of you would essentially be pulling from a common pool of magic. I’m not sure that your output would exactly be doubled, but it would be increased. You’d be able to cast more powerful spells, do so simultaneously if you wished, and use each other’s wands interchangeably. A Wand Bond will supersede other types of magical control, so you’d be able to more easily deflect, say the Imperius or Cruciatus curses.”

“But – but that would be perfect!” Hermione exclaimed, her eyes alight. “Harry could draw from my magic while his returned to full capacity. We wouldn’t have to worry that he would drain his in training.

And if – if Harry has trouble dueling Voldemort because of their wands, he could use mine!”

“Hermione,” Lupin said paternally. He seemed somewhat reluctant to speak, as if he did not want to rain on her parade. “Wand Bonds are almost classified as Dark Magic, at best dangerous and unpredictable, and at worst a kind of mutual magical slavery. Not much is known about the mechanics of casting them, and if the slightest thing goes wrong, you can wipe out someone’s free will. It helps that you’re married to him, of course, but it’s not just your magical signatures that are joined. I also said – ”

“Our life forces would be joined. Then if I died...”

“So would Harry. The converse would also be true. It’s true that Wand Bonds can sometimes pull one of the involved parties from the brink of death, but nothing can be done against curses like Avada Kedavra, for instance. If physical injuries are severe enough in one person, they can bleed over into the other person as well. You would be linked permanently. There would even be a certain distance beyond which you could not be apart without physical repercussions. I’m not sure the risks would be worth it. The Order would have two people to protect beyond all costs, rather than one, and Harry – ”

“Harry would never let me do it,” Hermione said quietly, her voice infused with certainty.

Fleur’s wand chirped softly, and the blond woman made a soft exclamation of surprise, interrupting Lupin. Hermione looked questioningly toward her, but Fleur’s brow was furrowed, concentrated on the wand before her.

And then several things happened at once.

There was loud splashing and much noise, as Aberforth pulled a spluttering Tonks from her face-first position in the shallow water, where she’d tripped and fallen. A group of people accompanied them, and Hermione was shocked at the bitter, soul-weary, suspicious atmosphere that seemed to hang over them, obvious even from her

position on the other side of the cavern. They began to cast drying charms on each other.

Lupin politely asked Hermione to excuse him, and he walked over to meet the newly-arrived people. Neville was also watching the scene with intense interest, as Blaise Zabini stepped forward to greet them. The others were obviously deferring to him as their default leader.

“...ow’s Seamus?” his voice drifted across to her, and she registered vague surprise that he had used their classmate’s first name. Lupin clapped Blaise on the shoulder, and said something low and unintelligible, nodding as he did so. The former Slytherin visibly relaxed.

Hermione’s curious eyes roved voraciously over what remained of her schoolmates. Michael Corner had one arm around Padma, and whispered something in her ear. She slumped against him with unmistakable fatigue, and her hair, braided around her head in a hasty coronet, glinted darkly in the low light. The Creeveys were impossibly skinny, even more so than before, and there was a hollow-eyed look to their faces that almost completely changed their appearance. Everyone was dressed in much faded and Reparo’d clothing, carrying small battered satchels, likely with everything they’d managed to hold on to shrunken inside. They were all thin, dingy, and battle-hardened. Susan’s hair had been cropped quite short, and it appeared that Megan was leaning heavily on a walking stick. None of them had put away his or her wand.

That was when Hermione noticed her... the one without a wand. Her second thought was that there were too many people. It must have garnered Professor Lupin’s attention at nearly the same time, for he approached the extra person, obviously a girl, though her head was turned so that Hermione couldn’t tell who she was. Then Tonks was at his elbow to explain, one light hand going from Remus’ arm to the mystery girl’s. Blaise joined them, adding his commentary, and Hermione caught the phrase, “detention facility”.

And then the girl looked up. Her teeth flashed white in her lightly tanned complexion, even darker now with blood and dirt. Her hair was pulled back in a sloppy ponytail, her clothing torn and filthy and

one shoe gone. A half-healed slash vividly crossed her collarbone and disappeared beneath the neckline of her shirt. She alone out of all of them had no wand. Hermione felt the dread like a fist delving into her stomach; it was immediately followed by a surge of embarrassment at the ridiculousness of her feelings. The unexpected arrival was Cho Chang.

Lupin was leading them toward the infirmary, gesturing toward the sleeping areas, obviously informing them where they could stow their things, although no one moved to do so.

"Are you done?" Hermione asked Fleur, in an abrupt way that stopped just shy of sounding truly rude.

"Yes," Fleur sounded hesitant, and Hermione raised one eyebrow a trifle impatiently. "But – is there somewhere we could talk... in private?" Hermione opened her mouth to immediately decline, but her eyes flitted down to the barely detectable swell in the other woman's abdomen, and sympathy kindled in her eyes.

"It's going to have to wait," she said in a nicer voice, and slid off the mattress. She flexed her fingers experimentally. "Thank you for fixing my hand," she added with sincerity, and moved to intercept the new arrivals.

She paused to run her newly-healed hand wistfully over the rail at the foot of Harry's bed, and so was startled violently, when he sat up with unnerving rapidity, calling out her name in a hoarsely exhaled gasp, all but knocking Professor McGonagall out of the way with his flailing arm. His eyes were wide and he was breathing heavily. Hermione instantly forgot about Seamus' team.

"I'm right here," she said soothingly, moving quickly to his side. He wound one arm around hers, as if to insure that she would remain there, and she lifted her other hand to caress the sweat-dampened hair away from his face.

"Hermione... what happened?" He looked up into her face, his vivid eyes beseeching her to explain.

"We were hoping you could tell us that," she said tenderly. A brief glance up informed her that Harry had arrested the attention of everyone in the cave. "I think he's okay," she murmured, and saw Aberforth surreptitiously lower his wand.

"I don't – I just remember the – the Circle...and that bird," he said, his gaze vague as he struggled to voice the memory.

"You don't remember how we got here?" He looked up at her again, shaking his head apologetically, as he leaned into her shoulder.

Madam Pomfrey had moved from Ron's bedside, where, Hermione noticed, Ron was still unconscious, a large white bandage now swathing his midsection. The mediwitch was briskly scanning Harry with her wand.

"There appears to be no lasting damage that I can see," she said finally, looking far from pleased. Hermione figured that she would rather have concrete evidence of something wrong, something that she'd be able to put right. They still had no explanation as to why Harry had collapsed the way he did. "You're a little dehydrated, but I suppose all of you could do with something to eat." Her reproving look included Hermione, but spread outward to encompass the other former students as well. "Perhaps someone – " The rest of her sentence went unfinished, as she looked toward the kitchen to see Luna Lovegood bustling about therein. In the ensuing quiet, the clank of pans and utensils could clearly be heard.

"I'll go help," Ginny said slowly, moving carefully toward the kitchen, her steps measured and precise. The faces of the new arrivals were grim, all of them obviously coming to the same conclusion about Ginny, yet another indication that nothing would ever be the same. For a brief moment, nobody said anything at all.

"I'll help too," Hermione said practically, gently untwining her arm from Harry's. "You stay here," she told him lightly, brushing her lips across his cheek.

“Hermione, you should rest. You also are recovering from injuries,” Fleur called out, the words bursting out as if against her will, but she met Hermione’s gaze squarely.

“I’ll rest later,” Hermione told the older girl firmly, her steps taking her toward the kitchen, but her mind on the War Room, already wondering what books would likely contain information about the Wand Bond. “There’s too much to do.”

In the end, everyone save the four worst injured had piled haphazardly in the vicinity of the War Room to discuss what had been going on. Hermione listened with one ear, as she ate a piece of bread with one hand and furiously took notes on the book she was perusing, with the other. Even Madam Pomfrey had drifted over to join them, after assuring herself that her patients were resting comfortably.

“So, when did they find you, Cho? Seamus didn’t say anything about you,” Fred began, in a conversational tone. It was Blaise who answered, in a very abrasive and Slytherin way.

“We broke her out of a detention facility just a few hours ago. Seamus knew about the operation.” He sounded defensive.

“Nobody’s accusing you of anything, Zabini.” Fred raised his eyebrows at the Slytherin’s tone. “If she wasn’t who she said she was, rest assured, she’d not be in here.”

“How did you find out she was there?” Ginny asked suddenly, in an effort to defuse the rising tension.

“We hear things,” Zabini sniffed.

“What else have you heard?” Tonks wondered, leaning forward on her elbows curiously.

“Everyone’s talking about Harry, of course,” Colin said, scraping the last of his food from an enormous trencher, and washing it all down

with pumpkin juice. “At first, there were rumors that he’d gone into hiding, that V – Voldemort had rendered him absolutely powerless. But then, stories started circulating that he was more powerful than ever, and that it was just a matter of time before he confronted Voldemort and ended the whole thing.” He blinked for a moment, and added. “The Death Eaters haven’t been too happy about that.”

Hermione felt a triumphant swelling in her chest, and her eyes drifted across the cave toward the gray-tinted dividers that concealed her husband and three of their housemates. Obviously, the owls from Neville’s clone had at least partially accomplished their aims. As she returned her attention to the book she was looking at, her gaze crossed Cho’s. She picked up her quill, and resumed writing, for a moment irrationally wishing that she was left-handed, so that her ring would glint in the light as she jotted observations.

“Has Voldemort been out of Hogwarts?” Aberforth asked. Zabini shook his head.

“Not since the last time you met with Seamus, as far as we know. Of course, we can’t be sure of anything since the informant at the pub in Knockturn Alley caved. The Death Eaters broke into his home while he was at work, and killed his wife and two children. Tacked their bodies to the front wall to greet him when he got home. Mike and I barely got away from there without being caught the last time we spoke to him.” Michael Corner was nodding absently, lost in thought, and Padma lifted her eyes to him worriedly, as she sat tucked into the crook of his shoulder. “They had Death Eaters watching the place, and he kicked up such a hue and cry at our arrival that we almost didn’t make it out.”

Hermione looked up from her notes again, intrigued by Blaise’s story. Her eyes wandered to Michael and Padma, and softened as she took in their obvious closeness. She could definitely empathize with the way they were feeling: scratching off their to-do list that they’d made it through another day alive and together, unable to refrain from touching when they were in each other’s presence, feeling constantly and strongly grateful/guilty at snatching moments of happiness when they happened to present themselves. Padma met Hermione’s gaze suddenly, and appeared to know exactly the direction of her thoughts,

because the Ravenclaw smiled, flicked her eyes up to Michael, back to Hermione, and then over toward the infirmary. Nothing had been publicly said about Harry and Hermione's relationship yet, and Hermione felt her cheeks warm as she turned back to her research once again.

Tonks made a comment about Seamus' knife and Zabini's crossbow, a large affair akin to Hagrid's that Hermione had been too distracted to notice upon his arrival. The Auror seemed to be of the opinion that Muggle devices could end up being useful. Lupin argued against it, referring to the fact that most wizards and witches could not accurately or safely operate such things, stating that it would take more time than they had to train. Zabini pointed out that his team had escaped right through anti-Apparation wards, under the very noses of the Death Eaters, in a Muggle automobile.

The War Room erupted in a heated debate, and Hermione lost the thread of the conversation for a moment, as she dove back into her book. She tried not to look guilty or surreptitious, as she flipped the pages, jotting down everything she could find on Wand Bonding. So far, she had not seen anything that made her think it would be a bad idea. If Harry died, they were all done for anyway. If Harry died, her own life would mean precious little to her. And if the Bond was successful, it could save them all. The fact that Harry would steadfastly refuse the risk to her life was unchanged, but Hermione was undeterred. I may just have to edit out the part about the life forces being joined, she thought resolutely. Once it's done, it can't be undone.

" – not sure we should be drawing Muggles any further into this," Lupin was saying patiently. "Voldemort has it in for them, as it is. Can you imagine what he'd do if he found out Muggles were helping us?"

"Remus, nobody is suggesting that we take Muggles into our confidence," Tonks replied, a hint of anger starting to flare up in her eyes. "Why can't we use what they know? It could give us some advantages that Death Eaters haven't even thought of."

"You haven't seen what this girl can do," Zabini put in, patting his crossbow fondly. "It's wand-aimed, can be keyed to specific people,

and the arrows are virtually indestructible and equipped with a homing charm.”

“And those are all magical innovations, aren’t they?” Lupin asked politely, with his eyebrows arched. “I don’t think there’s any limit to what we can do if we think outside of the box. For instance, Hermione here has come up with all sorts of ingenious things – personalized medallions that can pass through wards, voice-activated portkeys, charms to detect Voldemort’s clones.” He looked at Tonks and sighed. “You saw what the Death Eaters did to that Muggle village in Scotland. Harry and Hermione were nearly killed trying to save them. And that was just because Voldemort’s mother had lived there once. If they found out we were closely associated in any way with Muggles, their lives would be in grave peril. I’m not willing to risk the lives of innocent bystanders.”

“They might’ve lost their status as bystanders the day Voldemort declared open season on them,” Zabini put in quietly, and Hermione saw Dennis Creevey visibly flinch.

“There are rules too,” Lupin said. “Enchanting Muggle objects, performing magic in front of Muggles...” Tonks’ eyes now brimmed with angry tears.

“And who is going to report us? Arrest us? The government is gone, Remus. And we’ve had this conversation before.”

“There are reasons those laws were initially put into place. This shouldn’t be an excuse for anarchy,” Lupin said smoothly.

“Somebody better tell that to the Death Eaters,” Michael Corner said quietly.

“All the same, it is something that’s going to have to be thought about, dealt with...eventually,” Padma said. “Suppose we win... how are we going to get the infrastructure back into place?”

“That’s rather like putting the thestral before the carriage, don’t you think?” Luna asked in her trademark dreamy voice.

"It'll have to be discussed at some point," Padma reiterated.

"I think there are enough Ministry employees here that we'll have a good head start," Aberforth said with a finality that put an end to the sidetrack. "I think the cooperative is a good idea. There was an underground movement in France when Grindelwald was rampaging through Europe, and it was successful. I think the thing to remember is that there are more of us than there are of him, regardless of how it may seem."

"An Avada Kedavra from one of those clones will kill us just as easily as one from anyone else," Fred observed wryly, and Megan Jones snorted in assent.

"Which means we've got to get into Hogwarts," Hermione finally spoke up, having abandoned her studies as she became enthralled in the discussion. "The medallions can get us through the wards, but first we'd need –"

"Someone inside with a medallion," Fred finished for her. "How the hell are we going to get someone inside?" The silence in the cavern was thick and heavy, broken only by the soft slosh of water against stone. Hermione chewed on the end of her quill, deep in thought, but sprang up suddenly, her eyes on fire.

"The stationary – from the passage. I put it in – wait half a moment!" She stammered inarticulately, almost sprinting toward the infirmary before she'd even finished speaking.

There were a few bemused glances exchanged, but most of the Order members, as well as those who had been in Gryffindor House knew of the tendency of Hermione's brain to move at much higher speeds than her mouth.

Almost as soon as Hermione disappeared around the divider, there was an alarmed shriek that had Lupin and Madam Pomfrey springing for the area before the echoes dwindled away.

“Harry’s gone!” Hermione cried in alarm. Her eyes cast over Seamus and Ron, deep in an artificial, magical sleep, and Neville, who had jolted awake when she shouted. “Did you hear him leave?”

“I’m sorry, Hermione,” Neville responded, shaking his head contritely. “I didn’t hear anything. She plunged through one of the dividers, and there was no time for it to adjust adequately to her wild movement; the entire bank of dividers came down with a resounding crash, but Hermione didn’t appear to notice. Her eyes moved frantically over the features of the cavern. They had all been in one corner; there had been shouts, animated discussion – it would have been easy for him to sneak away unnoticed. But where would he go? And why?”

Her eyes fell on the softly rippling blackness that led into the depths of the Lake, and she knew. Without looking back at the rest of the group, she plunged headlong into the water, gasping at the chill of it, while protesting cries rang in her ears. Paying them no heed, she ducked beneath the water long enough to release a stream of bubbles that meant,

“Accio Harry!” She broke the surface again, spluttering, her teeth clattering noisily together, dripping hair streaming into her face. When she swept it back out of her eyes, she looked up with a start to notice Zabini standing right behind her, thigh deep in the water. Nothing moved in the water, and she felt herself begin to crumple, thinking that she might welcome the Lake’s clammy embrace.

“C’mon Granger,” he said almost gently, gripping her shoulders, keeping her on her feet. “Let’s get fitted up properly, and we’ll –”

And then there was a noise like rushing air, as the surface of the water frothed violently, and something heavy collided with both their legs. Hermione floundered as she tried to stay upright, and Blaise caught her around her upper arm with a viselike grip. She reached into the dark water, finally clasping onto something, and hauling it upward with all her strength.

When Harry emerged from the water, hacking and snorting, she didn’t know whether she wanted to kiss him or kill him. She noticed he didn’t have his wand, and wondered if he’d truly planned to swim all

the way to the shore with no Bubble-head charm in the inky blackness of the Lake.

“What were you doing?” she said, unable to keep the shrill note of chastisement out of her voice, as she and Zabini walked him out of the water. Madam Pomfrey was waiting with blankets, which she tossed around all three of them. Harry was looking at her in a bewildered way, as if he thought he should recognize her, but didn’t.

“You were calling me,” he said in a little-child voice. “You were calling me, and I was coming. I would always come, Hermione, you know that. I would always come for you.” Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat with difficulty, making a noisy gulping sound.

“Of course you would, Harry,” she said. Her teeth finally stopped clacking together, as someone – she wasn’t sure who, and they had the undivided attention of everyone in the cave that was conscious – cast a drying spell on them. She eased Harry back onto the bed, as tenderly as she knew how, but he was still shivering violently, his face chalky white

“You mustn’t leave the cave, Harry. Not without telling anybody. It isn’t safe,” she said, stroking his raven hair. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Madam Pomfrey casting several wards around his bed. Should he attempt to leave again, he wouldn’t be getting far without alerting everyone present.

“You were calling me, Hermione,” he said again, in that same distant, bewildered-sounding voice. She looked up and met Remus’ knowing gaze.

“It’s the Circle, isn’t it? It has to be,” she spoke evenly, not waiting for his reply. “Is he going to keep trying to go back there?” Suddenly the werewolf looked very tired, and he ran one hand shakily through his hair.

“I don’t know, Hermione. The bond between Harry and Voldemort is one that we haven’t even begun to plumb the depths of. But ...it certainly looks that way.”

Hermione gazed into middle distance, almost as if she had not heard Lupin's response, but her mind was whirling furiously. The bond between Harry and Voldemort... a Wand Bond supersedes all other magical control... She was going to have to form the Bond, without Harry knowing all the consequences of it – and she was going to have to do it soon. She felt Lupin's gaze on her face, and she quickly schooled her features to show only worry over Harry, which wasn't hard.

She leaned down to kiss him on the forehead, and he groped for her hand, twining his fingers with hers. Madam Pomfrey was standing nearby, holding a container of what was probably Dreamless Sleep potion, and she seemed to be looking to Hermione for permission.

"Good night, Harry," she said softly, and jerked her chin downward in a barely perceptible nod to Madam Pomfrey, who began administering the potion. Harry's eyes soon slid shut, and Hermione watched him pensively for a moment, moving to the foot of the bed. She tried not to think about the way her heart had catapulted into her mouth when she came through the divider and saw that same bed empty, only a few moments ago. Thank God, I came over here, or it – she stopped suddenly, remembering why she'd been in the infirmary in the first place, and moved back to Harry's side, lowering the sheets and patting around his clothing for the zippered pocket into which the portkey components had been stored. When she found them, she carefully handed them off to Fred for safekeeping. "This is how we got into Hogwarts dungeons. This is how we get someone inside." Fred's eyes lit with a knowing gleam, as he held the bundle aloft, seeming to imagine what was inside.

"But who's going to go in?" Tonks interjected. "We've got Harry's invisibility cloak, but there are probably wards or magical devices there that can see through them. There's nobody that could even momentarily pass as belonging there."

"Someone could at least go to scout out the place," Zabini said, shrugging. "As long as there isn't an attempt to go into the more secured areas of the castle, and if the Death Eaters don't know that we know about this portkey, then they'll have no reason to suspect we're there at all."

“And if the scout is caught, then they will figure out how we got in, and we won’t be able to use that method again,” Tonks said icily. “It might not be so easy to find another way into Hogwarts.”

“The fact is,” Lupin said, overriding the argument between Blaise and Tonks, “that nobody here belongs at Hogwarts, and everybody here knows entirely too much about Harry anyway. But someone is going to need to go.”

“I’ll go,” Blaise said smoothly and immediately.

“Yeah, I bet you’d love the opportunity to get in Hogwarts and spill your guts,” Fred replied.

“Now, wait just a minute, Fred,” Michael Corner tried to defend the Slytherin.

“So now you’re accusing me of something, Weasley?” Zabini retorted. “Is this what I’m always going to be able to expect from you?”

“Let me do it,” piped up a voice that silenced everybody before the situation could devolve into a free-for-all. Neville was speaking from his bed in the infirmary. “Hermione said – they may not even know I’m gone yet. If you can send me back with the cloak and a wand...if I get caught, they’ll just think I got out somehow. The passageway won’t be compromised.”

Everyone stared at him for a moment, and Hermione said,

“Neville...” in a quiet, admiring way.

“He should stay here,” said another voice. Neville’s clone stepped out from the shadows of the corner where he’d been held, his small room destroyed when Hermione knocked down the dividers. All of the color drained from Neville’s face, and someone in the cluster of people swore softly under his breath. The clone looked at the rather sullen faces, but remained as resolute and determined as any Gryffindor could hope to be. “Send me instead.”

TBC

Okay, this one was a little hard for me to write, because there was a lot of exposition, and I just brought a boatload of characters into the mix, but I hope you enjoyed it. I had fun with the fight between Hermione and the Death Eaters, and I hope I showed a little of Hermione's fallibility.

You may leave a review on the way out, if you like!

Lorien

Chapter Twenty-One: Mission

The infirmary had finally settled down, and Hermione decided to go back to the partitioned room, where she and Harry had slept only twice, and gather her things for a hot shower. Harry was sleeping soundly, under the effects of the potion, and the bed was warded to such an extent that they would be alerted if he did much more than roll over.

As she padded across the open center of the cave, her eyes caught Zabini, hunched with Fred, Aberforth, Tonks, Remus, and both Nevilles, discussing something intently, bent over what looked like the Marauder's Map. Penelope and Madam Pomfrey were keeping watch in the infirmary, and it looked like almost everyone else had gone on to bed. Having finally stopped long enough to notice, Hermione was well aware of the soul-sucking fatigue that had been leeching away at her all day. She hungered for the softness of sheets and a mattress like a woman starved.

The divider obligingly thinned, and she reached for her wand automatically to brighten the light so that she could find her clothes and toiletries. Her wand wasn't there, and her mind went momentarily blank before she remembered that she'd left it in the infirmary, likely in the last empty bed together with Harry's.

"Damn," she swore under her breath, as she ineffectually patted her pockets.

"Lumos," came a voice from behind her that made her jump. The light in the room brightened, and the dividers obligingly darkened as well.

"What the hell are you doing, Fleur? You scared me to death."

"I need to speak with you, Hermione," said Fleur. "It seems an ambush is the only way to attract and maintain your attention." Hermione restrained herself from rolling her eyes, and strode to the trunk at the foot of the bed, rifling through the contents for some fresh clothing.

"Here I am," Hermione sighed. "Speak."

"There was something... I found on your wand scan that I think you should be aware of," Fleur said evenly, lifting her chin to meet Hermione's eyes. The younger girl felt dread began to pool in the pit of her stomach.

"Am I sick?" she asked suddenly, worrying that some infection had entered her body through her raw, burned skin, or that there had been some insidious witchery at work inside the Circle. If something really was wrong, what would Harry do? Would she be able to continue functioning at such a critical time as this? Her imagination ran wild at Fleur's solemn expression, and the furrow above her brows deepened considerably.

"No," Fleur responded, faintly shaking her head. Her gaze seemed to be boring into Hermione; she seemed to be willing the younger woman to know what was implied, before she was forced to actually verbalize it, but Hermione was drawing a blank. "You're pregnant."

Hermione was shaking her head, backpedaling away from Fleur, before the final syllable had even crossed Fleur's lips.

"No," she said, her head moving back and forth emphatically, as if that would wipe it from reality. "No, that's – that's not possible."

"I checked twice," Fleur's voice was soft, her eyes limpid and sympathetic.

"We are careful. You think we don't know what that would mean, what that would do, to have a child at a time like this?" Fleur's hand had drifted down to her slightly rounded abdomen, still all but undetectable, and Hermione regretted the way her words had come out. "We have always done a contraceptive charm, Fleur. Always. There is no possible way that I'm pregnant."

"Hasn't Harry always been one to beat the odds?" Fleur said, lightly, but compassionately. "It surprised me as well, and I double checked. Cast the scan on yourself. I know that this is not something you're prepared for at this time, and I will be happy to be wrong."

Hermione's head was spinning, throbbing; the room seemed to whirl around her. The contents of her stomach were sloshing around, as if discontented and disgruntled in their current locale.

"I – I don't have my wand..." she stammered, wondering why she was getting so upset over this. It's not true; of course it's not true. There's no reason to get in a state.

"Would you like me to do it again?" Fleur's voice was soothing, flowing over her like liquid, like silk.

"No," Hermione said faintly. "No... I'll – I'll go get..."

"Let me get your wand," Fleur said calmly. "Where did you leave it?"

"In the infirmary," the frazzled girl responded. Fleur glided through the dark dividers without another word, while Hermione paced frantically in the confines of the little room, stopping only to pull bottles of shampoo and soap, towels and pajamas, in her arms in a thoroughly distracted fashion.

It's a mistake, that's all. Fleur's made a mistake. That contraceptive charm was flawless. If there's one thing I can have faith in, it's my spellwork, surely.

Hasn't Harry always been one for beating the odds? Fleur's quiet question resounded in her mind.

What if she's right? she wondered abruptly, and her hand wandered down to her flat abdomen. What if I am? Even the thought of what that would mean made her stomach churn. She vomited into the small wastebasket in the corner, and then sat back on the bed, trembling and weak, her face clammy and damp with sweat. Her mouth tasted sticky and thick, and she wished she could conjure up a glass of water. What the hell is taking Fleur so long? Her stomach roiled.

A lifetime of tortured moments later, it seemed, Fleur re-entered, holding Hermione's wand in her hand, instantly taking in the Gryffindor's panicked state. She neatly Scourgified the wastebasket,

with no comment, and produced a glass of water, handing it to Hermione along with her wand.

“I’m sorry it took so long. Madam Pomfrey realized that she had not looked at you. She asked me how you were doing, with regard to your burns and your fingers.” Her wide, beautiful eyes blinked disarmingly at Hermione.

“You didn’t tell her, did you? You didn’t say anything? Because we don’t know anything yet... It’s a mistake!” Her voice subsided, as she lifted her wand. “It’s got to be a mistake... a mistake...” She spoke in a low voice, as if to herself.

“She will have to know eventually, or she won’t be able to provide care for you,” Fleur pointed out. “But, no...I said nothing. I thought it was not my place to say.” Hermione didn’t reply, her mind whirling at breakneck speed, her heart pounding so rapidly and loudly that she could feel it vibrating her eardrums, her ribcage, throbbing in the slender column of her neck and in the newly healed joints of her fingers. Her arms felt suddenly like they might go limp, and she clutched her toiletries to her more tightly in response. “Is everything all right?” Fleur asked in concern. No, everything is going to hell, she wanted to shriek, but nodded, with a weak smile. At least, she could quickly put this headache to rest, when the wand scan came back negative.

She cast the spell for the basic medical scan, and ran the wand back and forth over herself. It whirled along contentedly, until it passed over her abdomen, where it made a puzzled chirrup, much as it had when Fleur had performed the scan. The memory of Fleur’s wand scan, her exclamation of surprise, her furrowed brow rushed back to Hermione suddenly.

She was fighting off nausea, feeling dizzy and panicked, and knew that all the blood had drained from her face.

“This can’t be true. It can’t be true. It can’t be... can’t be...” She was mumbling the words under her breath, as if saying them enough times would make them so. She cast the spell again, and produced the same result. She cast it again.

“Hermione, you are pregnant,” Fleur said, firmly. “No matter how many times you perform that scan, you will still be pregnant.”

“It says – it says ten weeks,” Hermione stammered, in a barely audible voice. “I’ve had – I’ve had a cycle... I’ve had one since then. I – I would have noticed if it had been that long...” Truth be told, she was more than overdue for another one, but her periods had never been regular; even a potion couldn’t make them more than sort-of-reliable. She wouldn’t have been worried for another several days, at least.

“How light was it?” Fleur asked knowingly, and Hermione stopped, with her mouth hanging open. It had been very light, light enough for Hermione to be gratefully surprised. Oh, God, she thought, even then... “You should go talk to Madam Pomfrey. She can – ”

“No!” Hermione said vehemently. “No, I’m not going to talk to anybody about this. Do you understand me? You cannot tell anyone!”

“But Harry will – ”

“Especially not Harry,” Hermione hissed. “This is the last thing in the world he needs to have hanging over him right now.” Her jaw trembled as she tried to control herself enough to continue speaking. “Do you know what Voldemort would do if there was a child he could hold over Harry’s head? Besides, the Order needs me...they – they – they need all the fighters they can get, and I – you –” She didn’t have to finish. Both of them knew that the only way Fleur would be allowed anywhere near a battle is if everyone else had already died.

“What are you going to do then?” Fleur asked quietly. Hermione watched the other woman’s elegant hand drift downward, cupping the unborn child within her, only now beginning to make its presence outwardly known. How far along is Fleur? Hermione wondered distractedly, twenty-one, twenty-two weeks?

“I – I don’t know...” Hermione admitted helplessly, feeling tears prickling at her eyelids. There was a simple potion that could be taken. Madam Pomfrey would be discreet. It would hurt like hell, she was

sure, and it would be difficult – nigh impossible – to keep it from Harry, but wouldn't it be better this way? Wasn't it selfish to bring a child into this kind of world, where nothing was certain?

Nothing is ever certain, another part of her argued, her own hand stealing down to her stomach. This is part of me, part of – part of Harry. He's always wanted a family. How can I let this go? And would he forgive me if he ever found out? Am I prepared to keep a secret like this from him forever?

Before she could understand what was happening, she was crumpled on the bed, sobbing as if her heart would break, and Fleur was sitting on the mattress next to her, patting her softly on the back and murmuring soothing nothings in French.

At length, she was spent, her eyes on fire, her skin stretched and taut, and her head packed painfully full and congested. Fleur conjured up a white cloth and cast a Cooling charm on it, laying it gently over Hermione's eyes and forehead.

"It's okay, you know," Fleur murmured. "It's okay to feel ambivalent about it. It doesn't mean you're a horrible person."

"I feel like a horrible person," Hermione mumbled. "A horrible, careless, sneaky liar."

"I think you should talk to Harry," Fleur began. "He loves you very much, and he would –"

"Fleur, no!" Hermione repeated, insistently. "I'm not going to tell him about this. He doesn't need to know." She looked at herself critically in a small hand mirror that she retrieved from her trunk, and tried to correct the worst of the damage done by her outburst. Fleur drew herself up regally, and for the first time in quite some time, Hermione saw raw grief shadowing that otherworldly beauty.

"My husband died before he knew – before I even knew – that I was carrying his child. If you decide to have this baby, it will not be easy, but you still have your husband. Do not forget that. Harry deserves to know. I would – I would give anything to have been able to tell Bill, to

see his face when..." Her voice ended in an unexpected sob, and Hermione felt ashamed.

"But Harry is Harry, the 'Chosen One,' the Boy Who Lived, pick any moniker you like," Hermione said, after a moment, struggling to keep the determination evident in her tone. "And nobody in this place – myself included – truly understands what he is going through, what he has gone through since he was a baby, and what is still expected of him. I am not going to be the one who piles on even more pressure and expectations. He does not need this now." The two women regarded each other coolly for a long moment. "Fleur, I'm asking you to please respect my wishes in this. Will you do an Unbreakable Vow with me? Swear you won't tell anyone about this?"

"No," the young widow replied, after a moment of consideration. "You don't need to keep this from him forever. But you have my word that I won't tell him...yet."

Hermione looked as if she would have liked to protest, but Fleur's expression didn't seem to leave much room for it. The swirling, uneasy sensation in her stomach seemed to have abated for the moment, and Hermione suddenly felt very, very tired. Her shoulders slumped, and Fleur softly patted the one nearest to her.

"I – I – " For a moment, Hermione felt as if she had no more will to move, and she was finding it hard to string together a coherent thought. She had not thought for a moment that the day would end like this... with Harry in an artificial sleep, drugged and warded against possible mind control, and Fleur sitting on her bed, calmly telling her that she was going to have a child – Harry's child – and knowing that, paradoxically, there was nothing she wanted more...or less... than that right now. She took a deep breath, releasing a gusty sigh, and looked blankly at Fleur.

"Go and take a shower," Hermione was instructed softly. "You'll feel better."

"Will I?" Hermione asked cryptically, almost laughing in a dazed way. But she did as Fleur suggested, ducking through the dividers, with

her arms full of shower things, making her way to the area of the cave set off for the loos.

But there were some things, she reflected mournfully, that a shower could not wash away.

Her mood had not improved with the shower, the smell of her flowery soap and the feel of steamy water doing little to make her feel any better emotionally. She stood in front of a mirror, in a small tiled anteroom that Tonks had set up, looking at herself in the mirror. She was wearing comfortably slouchy clothes, and had twirled her hair up on top of her head, leaving it wet, though the worst of the water had already been wrung out. Drying charms made her hair even frizzier, and she only used them when she was in a hurry. Her eyes were no longer as red as they had been after her bout of tears, but they were heavily shadowed, and her face still looked a little puffy. She cast a couple of Refreshing charms on herself.

Look at the poor little Mudblood, she thought dispassionately. First she was Harry's best friend, then his lover, now his wife, and she doesn't even have enough brains to keep herself from getting pregnant.

She sat down abruptly, backing up until she was against a wall, enjoying the feel of the cool tile beneath the soles of her feet and through the thin material of her t-shirt. She looped her arms around her legs, and propped her chin on her knees. What am I going to do? She had never seriously considered termination, simply because she had never seen herself in a situation where it would become an option. She was prepared, well-read, cautious, trained in self-defense; she had rarely done anything without thinking of contingencies and consequences. And nature had come and bitten her in the arse anyway.

Because it was Harry, the option seemed desirable. This was war; he was the focal point, and this baby would have a target painted on it before it was even born. And yet, because it was Harry, the option also seemed untenable. He would be able to see the sense in it, she was sure, but he would also realize that the child was part of him,

something of his, and he would want it anyway, she was also sure, regardless of the practicalities.

Could parenting a child be distilled down to pros and cons? She had always seen herself as becoming a career woman, ambitious and driven, shattering the glass ceilings placed by those who thought that women and Muggle-borns were somehow less than worthy. She could admit to herself that part of this had come from the realization that she was never likely to have boys knocking her door down either. But Harry had changed all that – all of it, and she suddenly, desperately, irrationally wanted his child.

“I’ll sleep on it,” she mumbled to herself. “I’ll sleep on it, and decide what to do in the morning.” Even as she spoke the words aloud, a tiny voice inside her said, You don’t have to tell anybody yet. There are glamour charms. Perhaps the war will have reached its conclusion in eight months. “No,” she stilled the hopeful little voice. “Sleep first.”

She stood to her feet, gathering her things, and was nearly to the door, when she all but collided with someone coming in ... Cho Chang.

“Sorry,” the new arrival said, seeming to look everywhere in the tidy little room except at Hermione.

“Quite all right,” Hermione tried to say casually, hoping that she didn’t look as frazzled and confused as she felt. She was almost through the divider, when Cho suddenly said,

“Erm...” Hermione politely waited, even though every fiber of her being was screaming at her to get away. She shifted the bundle of towels and bottles in her arms; it seemed ages before Cho spoke again. “So... Ginny told me... you and – and Harry – ?”

Hermione could only imagine that Ginny would have been unable to refrain from having some kind of perverse pleasure in telling Cho of her and Harry’s relationship. Something akin to I can’t have him, but then again neither can you.

“Yeah,” she heard herself saying, as if from very far away. “We – we got married... two days ago actually... almost three. McGonagall performed the ceremony.”

“That’s – that’s great. Congratulations,” Cho enthused emptyily.

“Thank you,” Hermione chirped, with just as much substantive emotion in her voice.

“Padma – Padma said – ” Cho blurted, as Hermione once again moved to exit. “She said Michael proposed to her... a few days back.”

“Really?” Hermione said, sounding more sincere. “That’s brilliant. I’ll have to congratulate them.”

“Yeah...” Cho said, and the conversation trailed off to an awkward halt again. Hermione belatedly wondered what it must feel like for Cho, to have been arrested and detained – probably tortured and interrogated for her connection to Harry, however small – only to be rescued and brought to live in close quarters with not one, but two ex-boyfriends, both of whom had moved on. It was another reminder to Hermione of a fact that was all too easy to forget these days... they were all still so young, and their last days of young adulthood that could have been carefree and fun, days of self-exploration and discovery and aspirations for the future, were slowly trickling away like sand through an hourglass.

She smiled crookedly at Cho, trying not to think of Harry’s baby inside her, and moved to step through the dividers again.

“Hermione?” Cho said once more, and Hermione again stopped and turned. “Are – are you all right? You – you look like you’ve been – ”

“No, no,” Hermione said more heartily than she really felt. “I’m fine, just fine... just a little worried about Harry.”

“Of course,” Cho replied quietly. “We’re all thinking about him.”

“I know he’d appreciate it,” Hermione said, and scooted through the doorway before Cho could say anything else. The other woman made

her feel flustered and childish, and that irritated her. She wondered why on earth Harry couldn't have dated some dowdier people before they left Hogwarts.

"Hermione!" she heard Fred hail her as she padded back across to her room. "Can we have a word?"

Inwardly, she felt herself sigh, but she squared her shoulders, and faced Fred with a smile.

"Absolutely," she said, indicating with a gesture that she needed to put her things back in her room. "Half a moment."

It had taken almost half the night, Hermione thought blearily, as she staggered back toward her room for some much needed respite, but she and Remus had finally managed to create a fully functioning duplicate of the Marauder's Map. It wasn't Remus' fault really, as it had been quite some time since he had first help create the original, but he felt terribly guilty that he wasn't more help at remembering the exact combinations of charms and spells. Everyone had agreed that it was absolutely essential that Neville's clone have one as well, going back into Hogwarts, and Hermione had even added some extra charms for Disillusionment and Camouflage that went beyond the simple blanking of "Mischief Managed." One of the additions that Hermione was proudest of was one that linked the two maps by written communication, in much the same way Riddle's diary had. Accessed only by written password, the map would absorb and transmit whatever Neville's clone wrote at the bottom to their Map back at the cave.

The consensus had been reached relatively quickly and with little debate. It was clear what had to be done, and what was required to accomplish that goal. If they were going to infiltrate Hogwarts, then one of the Nevilles needed to be back in the cell, and that necessarily needed to happen before anyone discovered that he'd been gone. The Map had remained activated since they'd left on their Lake mission, and nobody had been seen venturing down to the lower dungeons. What that meant, Hermione reflected, was that they were safe so far, but every minute they delayed made it more likely that someone would come down to check on Neville. Madam Pomfrey

came and scanned Neville's clone several times, finally pronouncing herself satisfied that he was clear of all the effects of the potion he'd been given by the Death Eaters.

Fred had bemoaned the fact that they had only Harry's invisibility cloak, when Zabini had produced another one from his pack with a flourish. Fred had been gleeful, and had asked where on earth Zabini had gotten it, only to be hurriedly subdued by the Slytherin's reply.

"It was my father's."

They were able to find Neville's clone a suitable wand from the pile that Mr. Weasley had brought back from Ollivander's, and Fleur worked on attaching a pocket inside his ragged clothes, on which Hermione placed several different and subtle masking and shielding charms. An enlargement charm was set on the pocket as well, so that the invisibility cloak, Map, and wand, would all fit in there, completely undetectable. To this, Fred added several knick-knacks from his shop, including Extendable Ears, Decoy Detonators, and something new that would fit in one's eye much like a contact lens, and enable the wearer to see in the dark, even through Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder. A little tin of the latter was slipped in also.

"You can't take a medallion, N – Neville, I'm sorry," Hermione had told him mournfully. The risk of a medallion falling into Death Eater hands if he was caught was too great. Hermione had been lucky that her medallion had been immediately destroyed. They decided to conceal one in the tunnel just past the stationary portkey, accessible only by his wand-initiated password, for him to use if he needed a quick escape.

"I – I know..." Neville's clone had stammered, looking frightened and yet somehow more resolved and determined than Hermione had ever seen him. The actual Neville had sat a short distance away in a chair against the wall, watching the proceedings, looking rather dazed, as if the entire surreal situation were something that he could not quite grasp.

"You'll need food." Ginny's voice had drifted to them, as she carefully made her way from the kitchen to the War Room. She was carrying a

tray laden with already-shrunken containers of food and water, and these were added to the secret pocket along with everything else. Ginny's face had been carefully blank and vacant, as if she were keeping her true feelings carefully concealed. Hermione had not been sure what Ginny was unhappy about: the fact that any sort of Neville was going back into such a dangerous situation, or that she could not accompany him.

"Who's going with him?" Hermione had asked upon thinking of this, trying to keep her voice brisk and businesslike, as she clipped a ward detector onto the end of his wand.

"I'm going to go as far as the tunnel," Tonks had replied. "And Blaise is going to actually escort him into Hogwarts. We'll need to have a couple of others. Aberforth should go, perhaps, because he has the most extensive knowledge of the countryside in this area. We don't want a large team, in case they're still searching the woods for you."

"I should go too," Hermione had said suddenly. Fleur's head had snapped up, and Hermione had become intently aware of the half-Veela's blue eyes fixed intently on her face. She had ignored it. "I'm the only one who's been there, who is healthy enough to go." Tonks had appeared to mull this over for a moment, and then nodded.

"You're probably right. It's obvious neither Ron nor Harry is in any fit state to go."

"Hermione, I don't think – " Fleur had blurted, but stopped at the quelling look Hermione was aiming at her. "You've had no sleep at all since you returned. I can't help but think of the handicap that will place upon your effectiveness." She lifted her chin, looking quite pleased at her fabricated excuse, and Hermione felt her eyes narrow.

"I'm fine," she had said, biting the words out ominously, as she struggled to smile politely at Fleur.

"Perhaps Fleur is right, Hermione," Tonks had remarked apologetically. "Take an hour, maybe two. Sleep. We want to leave when it's still dark, and pre-dawn is probably the least likely time that we'd have company. Blaise, why don't you pick someone else from

your team to go as well?" Tonks had appeared to have forgotten her earlier squabbles with the Slytherin.

"That sounds good," Hermione had replied, as Blaise mulled over his answer. She had been unable to stop herself from looking triumphantly at Fleur.

So there she was, halfway across the open floor and eager for a kip, however brief, when she was startled out of her thoughts by Fleur's hand around her upper arm.

"You should not do this," Fleur said. "You are doing neither yourself nor your team a favor by going on a mission when you are at less than optimum." Her eyes were flashing, but Hermione bristled.

"I am not at less than optimum," she retorted in a fierce whisper.

"Then you were not getting sick in the bin in your room?" Fleur asked archly, and Hermione scowled at her, hissing furiously,

"That was different. I was under stress. Now you listen to me, Fleur Weasley, I am not going to take myself out of this war, when I can still do anything at all to help the Order and Harry. I might be pregnant," her voice was low, and stumbled over the damning word, "but I am not dead or incapacitated, and you are not going to wrap me in cotton wool, or prevent me from doing my part in this war. I will not allow it."

"Don't you think you owe it to Harry to safeguard your life and the life of his child?" Fleur asked mildly. Hermione had turned away from her, as if to continue on to her quarters, but she stopped when Fleur spoke, her spine growing rigid.

"For the love of God, Fleur, shut up!" Hermione cried out, in a shouted whisper clogged with tears. "There are already three fighters out of commission, not to mention you and Ginny. We don't even know what's wrong with Harry, and – and – " her chin trembled, as the fear that she had been trying to keep at bay surged upwards. "They need me. I will not abandon them, and you shouldn't talk about what you can't possibly understand."

"My apologies," Fleur said with forced politeness, her face carefully composed, but her eyes flashing with suppressed emotion. Hermione ducked her head ashamedly, realizing that Fleur probably knew at least as much about risks and loss as any of them.

"This is all new to me, Fleur," she managed to say in an apologetic way. "If I stay holed up in here, I'll go mad. I haven't even decided yet if I ... I can't think about this yet – I just can't. I'll be careful, and I'll not take any unnecessary risks. Harry's well-being is very important to me, and so – so is – so ..." She couldn't finish the sentence. "I – I do appreciate your concern. Thank you," she said softly, and disappeared into her room.

The forest was mysterious and misty, with everything tinted a pearly gray, when they emerged from the waters of the Lake, and passed into the embracing arms of the outermost trees. Hermione, Tonks, Aberforth, Blaise, Neville's clone, and Michael Corner, who had also volunteered to go, adjusted grips on wands and cast drying and Disillusionment charms. The faint outline of Aberforth flicked its head in her direction, and nodded.

Hermione went first, trying to steer the group carefully in a line that passed between the entrance to the tunnel and the Circle, without ending up within the Circle again or going too far afield in the denseness of the woods. She knew that Michael was behind her, with Tonks and Aberforth guarding the clone, and Zabini bringing up the rear.

Nothing seemed to move in the eerie stillness, the sun having yet to make an appearance above the horizon, but being quite close to doing so. Some distance away, a hoarse-throated bird called out, suddenly and noisily, and Hermione jumped, stopping abruptly and causing Michael to collide with her.

"Sorry," she said in a barely audible voice, and that was when she heard the noise, the low rippling sound of voices speaking indistinct words. She looked over her shoulder with alarm, and saw that Tonks had heard it as well; a much smaller outline was gesturing to the others to get down. Hermione dropped to the ground near the base of

a young tree, and tried to remain absolutely still. Disillusionment charms were handy, rendering one nearly impossible to see, but movement would betray a person every time. There was a barely detectable rustle, as Michael slunk to the ground nearby, and the others on the team were lost in the dim light of the woods, melting into their backgrounds.

The voices stopped abruptly, and for one long hair-raising moment, there was absolute silence. There was a querying murmur, and a laconic response. Had they been heard? There was no way to know for sure. Hermione could feel the perspiration born of fear trickling between her shoulder blades, and knew that the hand tensely gripping her wand was clammy and damp.

“Avada Kedavra!” came a voice, frighteningly nearer than she’d thought – but she could see no one – and to her horror, the fuzzy outline of Michael crumpled to the ground with a muffled thump, less than two meters away from her. It appeared that he had merely been winged, but with a curse that was, of course, completely lethal.

She stiffened, spine thrown rigid by shock and horror, and she was unable to tell if the gasp she sucked in hurriedly was audible or not. She threw herself face first into the grass, and began to crawl slowly toward him, but the sound of voices again paralyzed her.

“Oy, I think I got sumpin’,” came a voice, probably thickened with whiskey and lack of intellect. Hermione felt tears burn the backs of her eyelids. What kind – oh what kind – of idiot fires the Killing curse into a forest, blind? “Told you summuns were out here.”

“Of course someone is out here, you blithering fool,” came a fierce, yet aristocratic voice, and Hermione’s heart turned to ice within her, as she realized who it was. Whatever she, Neville, Ron, and Harry had unwittingly done by stumbling into that Circle, Voldemort had obviously seen it as important enough to send one of his more trusted lieutenants, Lucius Malfoy. “Pray tell, why else do you think we were dispatched here in the dead of night? You’d better hope, for the sake of your miserable, pathetic life, that whatever just died was not another of the Dark Lord’s servants.”

Whatever just died... the knot in Hermione's throat was tight and painful. Oh, Michael...oh, Padma...She could see them now, charcoal outlines against the slate gray dimness of the trees, and realized with dread that they were coming to see what the curse had dropped, that she was going to be pinned down here, unless she did something quickly. She could not see any of the other team members, and did not know their exact position. Michael was a former Hogwarts student and member of the D.A., and Hermione was sure it wouldn't take the Death Eaters long to link him with Seamus and possibly Harry. The forest would be swarming with amoral idiots like the one approaching within minutes.

Damn, damn, damn, she cursed, and refusing to think further, she flung herself the final few feet, landing almost on top of Michael. The medallion, on its slim chain around her neck, seemed to burn into her chest like an ember, as she closed her eyes, clutching onto Michael's cloak tightly. Harry, oh dear God, Harry...

All she could do was hope that her lunge had not made too much noise as she vanished.

When she reappeared, still with Michael prostrate beneath her, and she wanted to sob with relief when she recognized the cool, stone floor of the cave and the sturdy metal legs of the beds of the infirmary. Her medallion had taken her right to Harry.

"What on earth..." came Madam Pomfrey's wondering voice, and Hermione realized that the Disillusionment charms still held. With a trembling wand, she performed Finite Incantatem, and heard the gasps of horror as they became fully visible.

She struggled to stand, barely aware of a hand above her elbow, assisting her. She looked into the tired, worried eyes of Remus Lupin.

"What happened?" he asked, obviously fearing the worst.

"Michael ... Michael – he – he – " She couldn't speak, found herself staring down at the glassy, lifeless eyes of someone she'd gone to school with. It had been so fast, so fast, and she wondered dimly if this is how Harry had felt when Cedric died. Until that moment, she

had not even noticed the similarities of her impromptu arrival with Michael to Harry's return with Cedric during the Triwizard Tournament. "There were Death Eaters...searching the forest... one – one fired blind, dear God, fired blind, and – and Michael..." She had the dim realization that she wasn't making any sense at all. She couldn't lift her eyes from Michael's body, and she couldn't remove from her mind the image of Padma tucked securely beneath his arm in the War Room.

"I'll get Padma," a soft voice said, and Hermione looked up wildly to realize that it was Cho. Their eyes met, and there was nothing there, but grief, weariness, and fear.

"I've got to – I've got to go back. The others won't know what happened to me. I couldn't see them, and – " She was babbling again, and Remus grabbed her by both arms, and looked intently into her face.

"The others – they're okay?"

"Yes, they – the – didn't even know we were there... it was a – blind shot, lucky shot... They weren't even sure if they'd hit a person...." The horror of it was gripping her tightly, more real to her than Remus' grip around her arms. Blind shot, lucky shot, useless, pointless waste... Her vision grayed a little around the periphery, and she shook her head suddenly, trying to pull her frayed, scattered mind back together.

"Go," Remus said, his voice low and nearly inarticulate. "Go back to Tonks. Neville's got to get back in that cell." He jerked his head to the right suddenly, as if he thought Harry would rise up and protest the sending of his wife back into such a perilous situation, but Harry's chest rose and fell evenly, spurred by the Dreamless Sleep potion. Hermione's eyes welled with tears as she watched him, and then she looked back at Michael, and thought of Padma.

"Yes," she said simply, looking at Remus with a clear, direct gaze. She stepped away from Michael, intent on transporting back to Tonks, but her movement happened to coincide with Cho's and Padma's entrance into the infirmary. Hermione didn't know what Cho had told

her housemate, but Padma's hand flew to her mouth in horror, her knees buckling and her eyes overspilling with tears.

"No..." she said, shaking her head. "No...no, Michael, no..." Her voice was barely a whisper, syllables forcing their way through a blocked throat. Cho was openly crying, and Luna, who had appeared in the divider behind them, with one arm wound through Ginny's, had silent tears streaming down a pale, set face. Hermione's eyes slid shut, as the pending tears prickled fiercely, and she thought desperately of Tonks, as the world slid away again.

Tonks started violently, but made no noise, when Hermione appeared behind her. She could now see the others in the group drawn back into a loose knot, crouched in some underbrush, having crept some distance away from where they'd been. They could still clearly hear Lucius and the lackey, who may or may not have been joined by a couple of others, beating the bushes, looking for the fallen. Hermione heard one clear Accio through the indistinct mumbles, and she silently blessed the fact that she had left with Michael.

"Where's Michael?" Tonks' face was very close to hers, and she could see the shadowy outline of her lips move, though barely any hint of sound other than movement of air escaped. Hermione shook her head, as her eyes swam anew with tears.

"Gone." Her mouth formed the syllables deliberately. Tonks' head sunk between her shoulders, and she saw Blaise's jaw jut, as he shifted restlessly next to her. "I took him back to the Lake."

"We've got to get them away from here," Aberforth mouthed.

"Maybe we should go back." Tonks was clearly worried. "There may be others." Blaise was shaking his head; it looked like the leaves were blurring faintly, wafting in a non-existent wind.

"Once they find out Neville is gone, this opportunity will be closed to us. We may not have a chance to do this again, and that would mean that Michael died for no reason."

“Someone needs to draw them off. They’re convinced someone is out here. Let’s give them someone,” Aberforth said, straightening his shoulders.

“Wait! What about one of these?” Neville’s clone asked, pulling one of the Decoy Detonators from his hidden pocket. Hermione felt her heart seize up, as she saw the small, black cone. Tonks nodded.

“Do it,” she ordered, hardly even audibly. The clone knelt, and lobbed it through the bushes, parallel to the ground. There was a momentary silence, where Hermione figured that the Detonator was scurrying to a new location, followed by what sounded like a tree branch, at least a finger’s width in diameter, cracking noisily.

There was a noisy scuffle punctuated with exclamations, as the Death Eaters shuffled off in the direction of the crack. Quietly and with unspoken consent, the Order began to creep through the trees, in the general direction of the tunnel.

“Oy, Lord Malfoy!” came a voice, different from the one that had killed Michael. How many of them are bloody out there? Hermione thought in worry and frustration. “There’s nobody here. It were this little thing.” Hermione’s tortured imagination could see a Death Eater holding the small black device between his thumb and forefinger. It must have ended up right in front of him. Would there be no end to their ill luck?

“Godric be damned!” Lucius said. “That’s one of those Weasley devices – ”

“Weasley...” the first one breathed. The implications were clear.

“Spread out! Quickly! And send back to the castle for reinforcements. Potter may – ” and Malfoy’s voice trailed off into a intent mumble that they could not hear. The Order exchanged worried glances.

“We’re going to have to go back,” Tonks asserted, and even Blaise looked grim.

“No,” Aberforth said. “Let me go. I’ll draw them off.” Tonks was already shaking her head, vehemently against the suggestion. “It’ll

work. If they catch me, or even see me, it might clear the rest of you. I'm connected to Albus, who was connected to the Weasleys. They might even drop Harry out of the equation. Most people have always thought I was more than half-mad anyway. I'll go back to the Lake, if I succeed in drawing them away." Tonks wavered for a moment that seemed to last an eternity. Finally, she held out her hand, palm up.

"You'll have to give me your medallion, Aberforth," she said quietly, struggling to keep her voice quite steady. Hermione watched Aberforth's eyes – so like the Headmaster's – spark knowingly, and moving slowly, he lifted the chain over his head, and pooled the piece of jewelry into Tonks' hand. The tears that had been threatening now began to drip down Hermione's cheeks, even though she knew they couldn't risk a medallion falling into enemy hands. The Auror swallowed convulsively. "Timed-memory spell?" she asked, and Aberforth nodded. Tonks did a nearly silent incantation, tapping Aberforth once with her wand, and he did the same, mumbling two words under his breath, one of which sounded vaguely to Hermione like "licorice."

He started to sidle away from them, moving deeper into the forest, away from both the Lake and the tunnel, but at the last moment, he turned back. Hermione could see his dim outline moving, as he met each of their eyes in turn.

"Albus would be very proud... of all of you," he whispered, and Hermione had to struggle to hold back a noisy sniff. Tonks pressed her arms against Hermione on one side, and Blaise and Neville's clone on the other, and the four of them shrank into the vegetation, as Aberforth broke into what sounded like a sprint, heedless of the noisy rustle and snap of leaves and twigs.

There were exclamations of surprise and anger, and the Death Eaters began to move away from them. Soon spells began to zing out here and there, and Hermione could hear Aberforth's voice taunting them, moving farther and farther away.

"Go!" Tonks prodded her in the ribs with her wand; the Auror's face was set and hard. Hermione knew what she was feeling: the mission had to work now, they had lost too much for it to fail. As they moved

toward the tunnel as rapidly as they could, while still moving silently, Hermione thought she heard a call, tossed faintly back on the wind,

“Oy, Lucius, you want to see some inappropriate charms?” A sad smile twisted her lips.

A moment later, they had come to the tunnel entrance, felled the guard there with a silent Stunner before he’d seen a thing, and slipped noiselessly inside.

Hermione’s detector charm reported no one inside the tunnel, and with the portkey dismantled, they knew everyone would have to come from the castle. They dropped their Disillusionment, but Blaise still had rear guard, and spent much of their walk strolling backwards.

“What was – what was that spell you used, Tonks?” Hermione asked, after clearing her throat.

“Timed-memory spell,” Tonks replied. “Version of Obliviate. All Aurors learn it. It implants a timed-memory wipe. It will automatically Obliviate in five minutes, or can be triggered earlier or canceled by one of two code words set by the person to be Obliviated.”

“So – so even if – even if he ... gets away – ?” Hermione stammered.

“He might not ever be back,” Tonks finished for her. “But if they do catch him... he’ll not give anything away, no matter what they do to him.” Hermione put one hand over her mouth. Images whirled dizzily in her mind. Michael’s glassy blank stare, as he lay motionless in the floor of the infirmary, Padma clutching at Cho, shaking her head, denying what her own eyes were telling her, Remus’ worried gaze resting on her, Aberforth Dumbledore dancing through the trees like a wood-elf, taunting Lucius Malfoy, Harry in a potion-induced sleep, a baby – their baby – inside of her, Fleur’s fierce eyes snapping at her refusal to tell anyone...Saliva rushed into her mouth.

“Excuse me,” she managed to say, turning quickly and vomiting to one side of the tunnel pathway, narrowly missing Blaise, who swore under his breath. She Scourgified the mess, and turned back to her

companions, her face crimson. "Sorry. I – I – I'm sorry." Blaise's eyes were sympathetic, and she could tell that he thought he understood.

"How was Padma?" he said, in a low, concerned voice. She blinked at him, and the metal of the crossbow slung over his shoulder gleamed and swirled in the minimal light from Tonks' wand.

"She – she nearly co – collapsed when she saw him. I – I couldn't stay, I didn't – " Hermione was shaking her head, and felt Blaise's hand come to rest gently on her shoulder.

"It's never easy, Granger, but it's why we've got to win." They continued walking, but Hermione felt drained. There were so many, so many Death Eaters, that they could thrash around in a forest, not even trying to be quiet, and still nearly pin down a tiny band of fighters. She hadn't been so completely aware of the sheer enormity of their ultimate goal since the Battle at Hogwarts.

Shortly, they had arrived at the place where she'd half-buried the controls to the stationary portkey. There were scuffs in the dirt that suggested someone had been there to investigate, but no repairs had yet been made. At the sight of the footprints, all four of them nervously reapplied their Disillusionment. Hermione pulled the components, returned to her by Fred, out of her pocket, and brushed the loose dirt away from the box, so that she could reinstall them.

After a moment, the small indicator on the outside cover of the box blinked an intermittent green, and Hermione looked up and nodded.

"It's ready." Blaise adjusted the strap of his crossbow on his shoulder, and looked at Neville's clone.

"Are you ready?" he asked. The clone pulled the Marauder's Map out of his pocket, and they all bent their heads around it. The nearest people to the lower dungeons were in the Slytherin common room. There was not a sign of life on the deepest level. He folded the parchment up and tucked it safely away.

"Let's do this," he said.

“If – if you – ” Tonks said, but hesitated, and Hermione thought that she was trying to think of a better word to use than ‘betray’.

“Tonks, Harry is – ” He shrugged and looked uncomfortable. “I feel like Harry is one of my closest friends. My parents – ” He squirmed a little, and looked ill at ease again. “They – they gave their lives for this cause, as – as surely as Harry’s parents did. I wouldn’t betray that. I – I couldn’t, really... not even when I was under the influence of that potion.”

“I believe you, Neville,” Hermione said quietly, for once not stumbling over his name, and the clone smiled gratefully at her. “Be careful!” He nodded, and moved further down the tunnel, where the field of the portkey awaited. Blaise looked back at the two women soberly.

“Take it down as soon as we’re through. I’ll use a medallion to come back.” Without a backward glance, the two of them had crossed through, with only a flicker of green and faint crackle of energy giving testimony to their passing.

Tonks looked at Hermione, her eyes melancholy and anxious.

“This had better work,” she said. Hermione simply bent wordlessly, and began to dismantle the portkey again.

When Blaise reappeared, nodding his satisfaction that Neville’s clone was now safely ensconced in the cell, apparently with no one being the wiser, Hermione did a final quick survey of the portkey controls, to assure herself that everything looked exactly as they had found it. Then, without further communication, they used their medallions to return to the cavern beneath the Lake.

Hermione arrived again in the infirmary to find Harry’s status unchanged. She wondered grimly what they were going to do, and the Wand Bond drifted through her mind again tantalizingly. Now, however, there was a third party to the equation. What happened when one tried to cast a Wand Bond while pregnant? Was the baby tied into the spell? If she were to miscarry, would all three of them die? And then there was the guilt, guilt that she was even contemplating doing something to Harry, without his informed

consent, without full disclosure. The only way, she thought frantically, it might be the only way.

But recklessness was not one of her more forceful qualities, and she knew that she would not do anything until she had found out everything possible, or until Harry's life had been placed in a more immediately precarious position. Her eyes went wistfully to Harry's still face, and one hand strayed to her waist, as she suddenly understood why Fleur was often in this position. She didn't feel any different, but it was there, resting, growing, a physical manifestation of the love she had for Harry, and Harry for her.

Someone called her name then, and when she turned, the scope of her vision caught the white-sheet shrouded form of that which had been Michael Corner. Somewhere in the distance, there was soft sobbing, from whom she did not know. She was at once forcibly reminded of the shakiness of the ground on which they stood. Fleur's doing it... and alone too, she thought, and wished forlornly for her mother, or Mrs. Weasley, wished for someone to just tell her what she should do, so that she didn't have to bear the brunt of this weighty decision on her own shoulders. Not even Harry is in a position to help me now.

She averted her eyes from Michael, and they danced instead to Seamus, still unconscious, half of his face shrouded in bandages. The grindylow talon had caught him across one eye, and they were afraid that the poison had done irreparable damage. Ron was in the next bed, sleeping naturally now. His color was improved, and Penelope had told her that he'd awakened to eat earlier, asked about her and Harry, and gone back to sleep. Then... there was Harry. What would happen if they awakened him now? Would he immediately try to get back to the Circle, heedless of the ramifications? The forest was sure to be crawling with Death Eaters, even though they'd surreptitiously Enervated the guard from the dim recesses of the tunnel, before using medallions to return to the cavern. Harry'd not make it three meters before being captured.

Her eyes went to his wand on the small table beside his bed, and then to hers, cupped loosely in her hand. Her stomach lurched unevenly, as she again returned to the enormity of what she was

contemplating, and her hand again shot, almost of its own accord, to her abdomen. A swath of red hair caught her vision.

“Ginny?” she dropped her hand guiltily, even though Ginny had no way of seeing her motion. It had been the youngest Weasley who had been attempting to get her attention.

“Hermione... I was wondering...” she said hesitantly. She seemed to realize she was halfway into the infirmary and paused. Her eyes roved around uncertainly, and she seemed to become distracted. “I can’t believe it... about Michael.” Hermione was reminded that Ginny too had briefly dated him. “Do you have time – I mean, Zabini is filling Professor Lupin in on everything, and I thought maybe – maybe you could tell me about who cast the – the curse on me. You said you...” She seemed to sense Hermione’s repugnance, and added hastily. “But you’ve had an awfully long day. We can do this later.”

“No, no that’s okay,” Hermione assured her, pushing aside her own fatigue and despair. She looked back at Harry again. “We can go talk about it.” She moved to the youngest Weasley’s side, and threaded her arm through Ginny’s, leading her to the room she and Harry shared.

They had both sat on the bed, cross-legged, and Hermione had cast a Silencing charm, but did not really know how next to proceed.

“Penelope said it would have to be someone who – who knew... about my worst nightmare...” Ginny began tentatively. “I – I don’t see how ... everyone who knows – they wouldn’t do that to me...” Her voice was hollow, a faint echo of its normal self, as she tried to contemplate that level of disdain and hatred.

“Ginny...” Hermione started to say. “Did you – did you ever tell anyone in a public place, where you could have been overheard?”

“No,” she replied. “I – I didn’t tell many people... it was so embarrassing, and – and shameful... that I – that I couldn’t stop him, that I wasn’t strong enough, and I – I didn’t like to talk about it. Most of the people that know are in this cave now.”

"It was Draco Malfoy," Hermione finally blurted, but regretted it when Ginny went so completely still that it frightened her. Rather than protesting or wondering how that was possible, Ginny's head drooped down toward her chest.

"Oh..." she said quietly. "Oh, I see..."

"You told him?" Hermione asked incredulously, making a quick determination from Ginny's lack of surprise or upset.

"I was so stupid!" Ginny said suddenly and violently. "I – I liked Harry so much, and – and third year, he was so – so distant and ... almost untouchable, one of the 'Triwizard Champions' and you got swept up in all that Rita Skeeter nonsense, and I – I just wanted to – wanted him to..." She floundered for a moment, gaze pointed blindly in the direction of the floor, seemingly lost in her thoughts. "I finally told myself I had given up, went out with Neville, Dean, and M – Michael. But I really hadn't and... fifth year, I ran into Malfoy in one of the corridors and he seemed so upset, and we – we talked a little bit. I wasn't holding my breath that he had changed, but he seemed – he seemed rather lost, and the more we – he mentioned getting swept up in things beyond control, and I told him that I knew exactly how that felt, and it – it just came out... I – After Harry noticed me, I was too embarrassed to tell anyone, and I was afraid that Harry might – might dump me if he found out. And when Dumbledore died – I ..." She shrugged, seeming at a loss for adequate words, but then turned, looking uncannily right at Hermione. "It's my fault then, isn't it? If I hadn't – Mum would be – " Her face crumpled.

"Ginny, no!" Hermione soothed. "They were targeting you because they thought you were dating Harry. Harry told me that himself, after we got away from Voldemort. If it hadn't been the Nightmare curse, it would have been something else. It's not your fault."

"How did you – how did you find out?"

"We ran into him at Godric's Hollow a couple of months ago," Hermione replied. "He was on some kind of sentry duty. Ended up right in Harry's back garden." She did not say what she and Harry had been doing in the back garden.

“What happened to him?” Ginny asked, rather doggedly, as if she really already knew the answer on some level. Hermione swallowed hard before replying.

“Ron killed him. He didn’t mean to, but...”

“I see...” Ginny replied slowly. Hermione watched a succession of emotions play across her face, and she suddenly felt sorry for everyone involved, for Ginny, who’d been duped into sympathy for someone not worthy of it, and for Malfoy, who’d been offered a hand of friendship and had used it for evil.

What will be left of any of us when this is all over? She wondered sadly.

TBC

AN: I didn’t want this chapter to get into some huge debate for or against abortion, but I did want to show Hermione at least attempting to clinically examine it from all sides, which is what I think Hermione would do. I think that someone in this type of extreme situation would be seriously considering all options, even if only briefly. Like Hermione, I have never had a reason to consider something like this, with my near-decade marriage, stable finances, and two planned children, but I can’t truthfully say what I would do in a situation like this one: war-torn, on the run, etc. I think Hermione rationally knows what the most logical choice would be, but she is also hampered/bolstered by her love for Harry and her knowledge of his desire for a family that he’s always been denied.

That being said, I will be sticking to tried and true, romantic fanfic cliché, like those (including me) who have the two main characters marry hastily, marry young, have babies after only one encounter, etc. She will decide to have the baby, but I wanted to express at least some of her ambivalence... this is certainly a less than ideal situation.

I really hope that I haven’t offended anyone. I think this is for fun, not for moral posturing or political statement. I believe her pregnancy adds another level of angst – not that she needed any more – not to

mention when Harry finds out, when others find out, when they find out how long she's been keeping it secret, etc. Lots of fun to be had.... And it has plot relevance as well – of course, having something to do with why Hermione could suddenly use Harry's wand (remember there has been no Wand Bond instituted as of yet)... and that has major ramifications later.

Okay, that's the end of my rationalization. Hope you enjoyed the chapter, and you may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Twenty-Two: Liberation

The low whistle of a bird caught Hermione's attention, and she laid one hand on Ron's arm.

"Seamus and Luna are done," she said. Ron nodded, his lips pressed tightly together and his brow furrowed in concentration.

"Almost...got it," he muttered, as a medium-sized wooden platform hovered several meters over his head, before settling gently into the crook of a tree. "Okay, Hermione, go!" As he held the platform in place with his wand, Hermione fastened it in with a well-aimed spell. A Caecus spell made it fade from sight, apparently leaving the tree just as they'd found it.

"Ready to go up?" she asked, and Ron shrugged reluctantly.

"You couldn't have made it invisible after we got up there?" he asked rhetorically, as they Levitated themselves upward. Hermione rolled her eyes at him, not bothering to answer, since she knew that the platform would be visible as soon as they'd passed through the barrier of the charm.

Once safely aloft, Hermione paced the length and breadth of the planking, wide enough to accommodate two people, possibly three if personal space was completely disregarded. She added an Engorgio spell to expand it slightly, while keeping it beneath the canopy of the Caecus spell.

"How's the line of sight?" she asked Ron, who was peering through the foliage toward Hogwarts. They were in a small tongue of trees that jutted out from the Forbidden Forest near the main gate and quite close to the road from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts.

"Good... excellent," he said matter-of-factly. "We've got a great view of the main gate, and Omnioculars may show us the front entrance of Hogwarts too. We should be able to see most anything going in that way." He looked over his shoulder at Hermione. She nodded.

“Stock her up, then,” she said. “I’ll finish the wards.” She moved carefully around the perimeter of the platform, setting up detection wards, Silencios, Distraction spells, and other useful tidbits that she hoped would keep anyone from disturbing the lookout. Ron carefully took the shrunken vials of potion, enchanted maps, and communications devices that they’d brought with them, and concealed them in a shadowy corner, layering them with several protective spells.

Lastly they embedded a medallion in a hollow they carefully carved out of the tree trunk. It was accessible only by approved-wand plus a password, and would enable them to travel between the lookout and the cavern without being exposed. When that task had been completed, they stood upright and exchanged glances.

“That’s got it then,” Hermione said, and Ron cupped his hands over his mouth and hooted like an owl. They were answered by another birdcall, lower and warbling.

“Blaise and Padma have done theirs as well,” Hermione interpreted. “Let’s go back.” Concentrating on the cave that remained their home, the medallions transported them quietly away from the Forbidden Forest.

“How’d it go?” Seamus asked, when all three teams had arrived back in the main part of the cave. A jaunty patch now adorned his face, covering what had once been his left eye. He joked that it made him feel like a pirate, and shrugged off Madam Pomfrey’s promises to fit him with a magical eye, once they had access to more advanced medical supplies. Hermione could see the new lines that had formed around his mouth, though, his forced jocularly notwithstanding.

“No problems here,” Hermione replied for her and Ron. Blaise and Padma concurred.

“Not so much as a centaur hoofbeat,” Blaise remarked.

“I wouldn’t set that in stone,” Remus said, rising from his seat in the War Room and joining them. “Centaur’s have a way of not being seen or heard, if that is their wish.”

“But surely, the centaurs wouldn’t side with Voldemort,” Ron protested.

“With a centaur, who knows?” replied Lupin. “They concern themselves with the skies, not with the squabbles of humans. After Dumbledore’s death, the herd retreated even further into the Forest. Maybe we should just count ourselves lucky that you passed in and out of the Forest without incident.”

The group trooped over to the Map, at the moment being watched by Mr. Weasley.

“Anything from the castle?” Seamus wondered. Mr. Weasley shook his head.

“Still nothing. It’s been three days. He was in the Slytherin common room for awhile this afternoon, but he must not have heard anything important.”

“Ginny and Fred back yet?” Ron asked abruptly, as if he’d just remembered it, and it couldn’t wait another second.

“Not yet,” Remus replied. The other two Weasleys had gone with Megan and Susan to Diagon Alley, just for reconnaissance. They had gone under heavy Glamour, and Ginny had been transformed into an old woman, so that escort could be explained away and her blindness, hopefully, go unnoticed. Ron had, predictably, been less than thrilled, but Ginny had been adamant, insisting that blind people did useful things all the time, and she had gotten particularly good at listening during the last six months.

“Did you find likely lookout sites?” Remus asked, returning them all to the task they’d just completed. The six of them nodded.

“Three sites, about half-kilometer apart, one nearly at the main gate, looking toward the front entrance of Hogwarts, and the other two watching the east face of the castle. The most southerly one also has a glimpse of the Lake; we may be able to see if anything enters or exits the castle from the launch,” Blaise reported.

“Medallions embedded?” Mr. Weasley wondered, and was rewarded with nods all around again.

“We’ll need to test them, and then we should be ready to man the lookouts. We should start out in teams of two. I don’t relish the thought of anyone being out there alone, even in a magically concealed platform,” Tonks had approached them as Blaise was speaking, and gave her Auror’s point of view. Ron looked as if he were thinking of the acromantulas, and appeared to wholeheartedly agree with Tonks.

“Aren’t we going to be spreading ourselves a little thin?” Hermione wondered, thinking of teams to recruit others, to do recon-work, to man the lookouts, watch the Map, watch the Lake entrance, and so on.

“Blaise and Seamus are going to be getting out in the next week or so, and really looking for others to help us. From what the Wireless has said, there are a lot of disillusioned people out there. We ought to be able to use that to our advantage,” Tonks said. “We’ve gotten a lot of information on the movements within Hogwarts from Neville – er... Neville’s clone...” she added, with an uncertain look at the actual Neville, who was listening from a War Room chair. “These lookout platforms should help us even more. The medallions in place there will give us freer movement, and we can to continue to gather as much intelligence as possible, without actually having enter the castle itself.”

They all fell silent, thinking of that inevitable moment when they would have to enter Hogwarts, and wondering if the Boy Who Lived would be at their side to help them win the day.

The days had slipped gently by at first, but then dizzily spun into weeks, and soon the small remnant of the Order had found themselves facing a Christmas like none they’d ever experienced before, and for many, it was the first such holiday without loved ones, stark reminders yet again of what was forever altered.

Hermione had found herself teetering on the edge of indecision, torn between logic and love, rationality and sentiment. She knew that if

she put off the decision for too long that it would be taken from her, and, in the privacy of her own thoughts, admitted that maybe that was really what she wanted: to put off the final choice until only one choice could be made. As if the knowledge of the pregnancy had been what spurred it into action, morning sickness had set in with a vengeance, confined not to a time of day, but triggered often by mere sights or smells of food, sending her to the loo with what she hoped was an urgent nonchalance that maybe no one noticed. She was eating little, losing weight, and luckily, most of the Order seemed to attribute it solely to worry over Harry. Only Fleur eyed her with an introspective, concerned gaze, and Hermione was often aware of the other's woman's contemplative watchfulness.

She was fretting over Harry, often dragging her research into the infirmary, so she could sit with him, often being found in the mornings curled up in the adjacent bed. He had not improved; the Circle had not relinquished its insidious hold on him, regardless of Penelope's and Madam Pomfrey's joint efforts to the contrary. There was generally a small window of near-total lucidity immediately after he naturally wakened from the Sleeping Draught that he was nearly drowned in on a regular basis. He knew who everyone was, knew at least the basics of what they were up against – although how much he retained from waking to waking was uncertain – and was able to recognize what was happening to him. However, this tended to deteriorate rapidly, with his crying out for Hermione, not appearing to realize that she was standing right beside him, struggling to get out of bed even to the point of wildly fighting off any restraining arms, until they were forced to shove more of the potion down his gullet.

On that particular afternoon, just days before Christmas, having returned from the mission in the Forbidden Forest, Hermione strolled from the shower back to her room – their room – gratefully noticing that Ginny and Fred's team had returned and were giving their report in the War Room. She discarded her dressing gown, and donned clothing distractedly, sighing in annoyance when she realized that the pair of jeans she'd selected had not yet had the waist expanded. She cast an irritated Enlarging charm at the material, and was then able to button them easily. Her figure was not to the point that anyone else would notice, but she was definitely seeing changes, and so would Harry if he – if ... She shook her head, closing her eyes, and tried to

remove herself from that train of thought. She twisted her hair into a hasty knot at the back of her head, and hurried out into the cave proper.

Constant heating charms were required now, and at a higher level than they had been at first, for the Lake – never terribly warm to begin with – was now extremely frigid. With Harry's mental state uncertain, and his connection to Voldemort along with it, there was now a guard stationed constantly at the Lake entrance. Wards were heightened, and there was always someone stationed at the Marauder's Map as well, just in case Neville's clone communicated.

She waved one hand at Tonks, who had relieved Arthur from Map duty, as she crossed to the infirmary. Mr. Weasley was in the kitchen, stirring something, and her stomach gurgled ominously and without anticipation at the thought of a meal.

"How is he doing?" she asked, stepping through the divider and greeting Penelope distractedly, as she moved toward Harry.

"He hasn't awakened yet, but it should be soon," the young mediwitch informed her, mustering a sympathetic smile. Hermione backed up onto the adjacent bed, and sat with her feet dangling down loosely.

"Then I'll wait," she replied. She could feel, rather than see, Penelope's searching gaze on her, and she looked back up expectantly.

"I'm sorry," Penelope nearly stammered. "It's just that – that you've been looking a little peaky lately. Are you getting enough sleep? Enough to eat?"

"I'm fine," Hermione said with a distracted sigh. Penelope was sidetracked from further probing by Ron's noisy entrance, and one corner of Hermione's mouth twisted upwards into a quasi-smile.

"How is he?" Ron asked solicitously, unintentionally echoing Hermione's question.

"We're waiting for him to wake up," she told him. Almost as if her words had been a cue for which he was waiting, Harry Potter blinked his eyes open slowly and deliberately, as if trying to remove grit. He rubbed them carefully with both thumbs, and reached for his glasses without looking.

"Hi," he said cautiously, his voice sounding sandy. It had been nearly sixteen hours since the last time they'd spoken with him.

"How do you feel?" Hermione said, sounding as wary as he, trying to project a deliberate and fixed calm. Harry's eyes moved to and fro, as if he were conducting an internal inventory.

"Okay," he said slowly, after a moment. "Hungry." Hermione made a motion to rise from the adjacent bed, but Ron beat her to it.

"I'll go get us a bite to eat," he said. She felt her nostrils flare instinctively, as she thought of Ron bringing a laden tray back into the infirmary, and glanced back at Harry somewhat guiltily. His eyes were fastened avidly on her face.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, reaching for one of her hands. Wordlessly, she slid from the bed, and moved next to him, threading her fingers through his. The wards were keyed to Harry only, so others could move about his bed freely.

"How's the pull today?" she asked, not answering his question, and referring to the hold the Circle seemed to maintain over him, though at these times, upon awakening, it was easier for him to ignore or suppress.

"Still there. Like a headache lurking in the background...sort of." His face was pale and drawn, lined with worry.

"Do you want to leave?" she asked him, phrasing her query delicately. He shook his head slowly.

"Not yet. But – but it wants me to go," he replied, then looked up into her down-turned face searchingly. "You didn't answer my question."

“I’m fine!” She spoke more sharply than she meant to, and had pulled her hand from his before she realized it. “We may not have much time,” she hedged, as he furrowed confused brows at her outburst. “I don’t want to waste it talking about me. We need to see how you’re doing.” Penelope had come to his bedside then, and was taking a careful wand-scan.

“I want to talk about you,” he said simply. “I feel like I never – like we – ” His eyes flicked over toward Penelope self-consciously. “We don’t get to see each other anymore.” Hermione’s lips compressed into a thin line, as she regarded him apologetically.

“I can’t help that, Harry. You know we have to keep you here, until we can figure out how to end this control that the Circle has over you.”

“Maybe I want to spend some time with my wife! And how long has it been since you’ve done anything but hover and worry?” he said, his voice growing louder, sounding completely frustrated with himself, with her, and with the situation. “They’d listen to you, Hermione.” Now he was pleading with her, and he couldn’t have rent her heart in two more effectively if he’d shouted cruelties instead. “If you – you could tell them... you could tell them to let me out of this bed, and they would listen to you. I miss you... Hermione, please.”

“I miss you too, Harry. And I love you so, so much, but I can’t do that. You can’t get out until we know for sure that you won’t bolt again. If you tried to swim the Lake now, you’d likely die of exposure before you got halfway to land. Not to mention the forest bordering the Lake is still crawling with Death Eaters... I know you don’t mean to, I know you can’t help it – that it’s that damned Circle, but we can’t risk it, Harry, we can’t.”

Aberforth Dumbledore had never come back, and what little hope the Order had sustained for his safe return had gradually fizzled and died. The cave had remained on heightened watch, and until quite recently, only Blaise or Seamus had ventured out very occasionally, and even then under heavy Glamour charms and the invisibility cloak. They reported that there were regular patrols through that sector of the forest now – something that had not been occurring before – but the patrols didn’t seem to have picked up any sort of clues as to who had

intruded into the Circle, or where they were now. Blaise had overheard them referring to Aberforth as that old madman, which gave them hope that they had never actually caught him and found out who he was. But if the Obliviation charm had been triggered, then, alive or not, Aberforth would not be returning.

“You could,” Harry said stubbornly, spearing her with an even, yet mutinous glance. “You could if you wanted to, if you trusted me...”

“Harry, it’s not about trust,” she nearly wailed. Did he know how much it hurt her to see him virtually caged like an animal or a prisoner... or a mental patient? Was he doing this on purpose? She looked furtively toward Penelope, who had moved back to the small desk, and was no longer facing them, but the rigid set of her shoulders told Hermione that she was listening intently.

“Yes, it is. Don’t you believe that I’m stronger than this? Don’t you trust that I can overcome this? It’s not supposed to be this way!”

“I believe that you could, yes, but – but you don’t have full control, don’t you see? That’s been taken from you... and it’s not your fault! Nobody is blaming you for this; we’re just trying to protect you. We – I love you, and I don’t want anything to happen to you. I want – ” She stopped herself in shock, nearly aghast at what she had been on the point of saying. I want our baby to know his father. She swallowed hard against the rising tide of nausea, and tried to think of something else to say. Harry had not previously been this verbally and articulately difficult, hammering away at her excuses with seemingly sane argument calculated to cut her to the quick, rather than mad and blind pleas for her presence.

“Hermione, that’s dragonshit!” Harry swore, slamming one open palm noisily against the railing of the bed, and Penelope looked over her shoulder with astonishment. Hermione vaguely noted the mediwitch reaching for her wand, but she was still hung up on what she’d almost said. When did I decide that I was going to have this baby? And when was I going to let myself in on that piece of information? “I’m fine. I don’t – I don’t understand why you won’t let me help. I can fight – I – I need to be training, and – and you’re just – you’re making it easier for him to win in the end. Is that what you want?”

"Of course, it's not, Harry," Hermione tried to say in a calm voice. "You know that."

"I don't know anything anymore." His tone was wounded, wearied. "I don't know you." She knew, she knew that he wasn't talking sense, but it still hurt her. She had had many and varied "discussions" with Remus about the Wand Bond, but he was still adamantly against it, unless the choice was between it and Harry's death. He argued that they didn't know for certain that it would override the hold the Circle had on Harry, and it could do more damage than good. Then, there was the fact that Hermione wanted to keep the life-bond information to herself, which Remus would not allow, not to mention Hermione's secret – which was still unknown by all save herself and Fleur – and the enigma of its effect on the Bond.

"You know I'm doing everything I can. Blaise is even planning a mission to Diagon Alley, to check out some of the bookshops to see if they have anything that can help us." She moved closer to him, leaning on her elbows on the bed, and pushed one soft palm through his hair. "Harry..." she murmured softly. He leaned into her caress, and his eyes closed, lashes making shadowy smudges on his cheeks.

"I'm sorry... I know that you – everyone's – I just hate this," he finished with a despondent sigh. "I miss you. I miss us. You – you've really gotten the short end of the stick in this thing, haven't you?"

"Harry... I don't regret any of it," she said softly, trying to reassure him. He looked up at her sadly, his eyes transmitting the depth of the love, despair, confusion that he was feeling. And even as she watched, they began to cloud. "Harry?" She leaned forward, threading her fingers through his, and brushing the dark hair back from his forehead. "Harry? No, stay with me, stay with me! Harry?" She bracketed his face with both hands, trying to force him to look at her.

It's happening so quickly.

Ron came back into the infirmary, tripping over the threshold of the divider, and swearing under his breath, as some silverware rattled noisily to the floor. Hermione barely noticed, her attention focused

solely on Harry. She felt like she was trying to tether him to this consciousness by the sheer strength of her will alone.

“Harry?” She was shouting, but strangely, her voice didn’t sound loud in her ears.

“What’s going on?” She heard Ron say, as if from a great distance.

“Harry, come on, love. Stay with me.”

“....can’t...” It was a harsh, guttural groan, hardly even a word.

“Is he already losing it again?” Ron asked Penelope rather inelegantly. “Should I get Remus?” Hermione did not see or hear the mediwitch’s response, but it must have been affirmative, for Ron disappeared through the divider again, discarding the tray on the nearest flat surface with a clatter.

The vivid green of his eyes disappeared, as the orbs rolled up in his head. His hands had been at his sides, one entwined with hers, but now one slowly moved up to snarl in her hair.

“I’m not sure what’s happening. Something’s different,” Hermione’s voice was urgent, worried. “Penelope...”

“I’m here,” Penelope replied, moving swiftly to the bedside, and beginning a scan. “Do you want me to get the potion?”

“Not yet. Harry, look at me.” His lashes had been fluttering wildly over his eyes, and they slid slowly shut. They reopened, and his breathing, which had been harsh and erratic, calmed somewhat.

“You...” he whispered.

“Hermione?”

“I think he’s okay,” she breathed in response to Penelope’s question. She leaned down toward her husband, her nose only inches from his. “Harry, are you okay?”

Harry blinked at her, looking at her almost blankly, as if he was trying to figure out who she was, and why she was asking him questions.

“Harry?” she repeated again, both of her hands going to either side of his face once more. “Harry?”

The hand that had been softly tangled in her hair suddenly clenched into a fist, forcing Hermione’s head back to release the pressure on the trapped strands. A small gasp of surprise escaped her lips, and she saw Penelope raise her wand in the periphery of her vision. Hermione lifted a warning finger, signaling for the mediwitch to wait.

“Harry,” she murmured, her voice nearly quivering from the effort to remain calm. “Harry, please let me go.”

The hand entangled at the nape of her neck suddenly trembled so violently that she could feel his fingers vibrating against her skin, and his arm fell back to the mattress like so much dead weight.

He looked bleakly at her then, and apology and resignation were warring in his face. His green eyes were flat and fatigued.

“Let me go, Hermione,” he said in an eerie echo of her own words. “If you’re just going to keep me trapped here... I – I can’t – let me go.”

“I won’t,” she said resolutely, trying to keep at bay the tears trembling on her lashes.

“Maybe you won’t...have a choice,” he rasped. His head jerked abruptly from one side to the other, and she saw his hands fist into the sheets. An inarticulate growl escaped his barely parted lips. “It – it – maybe I can’t fight it any more.”

“Of course you can, Harry. Don’t give up – ” Whatever useless platitude she had been intent on verbalizing died unsaid on her lips, as Harry’s back arched away from the mattress, his hands clenching onto the linen so tightly that his knuckles were white. Penelope was at Hermione’s elbow, but she signaled the mediwitch again to wait.

“He’s fighting it,” she whispered to the former Ravenclaw. “If he can snap the hold of the Circle by his own power, it might be better than anything else we could do for him.” She leaned forward avidly, her hands curled around the railings of the bed, watching her husband’s face carefully. There was a scuffle behind her, as other Order members entered the infirmary at Ron’s behest. She heard Remus say in a low tone of urgency,

“What’s going on?”

“It’s different this time, Remus,” Hermione said, turning toward them, a hopeful lilt in her voice. At that point, anything different was viewed as positive, something to break the monotonous cycle of sleeping potions and incoherent accusations and wild escape attempts. “He was making more sense when he spoke. He’s having a physical reaction to the pull of the Circle, but he hasn’t tried to get away.”

She turned back toward Harry, leaning with her elbows on the mattress, and smiled at him, even though his eyes were closed. His breathing was labored.

“Harry, can you hear me? Stay with me, love.” Penelope ran another scan, while Hermione murmured soothing inanities, brushing his hair back from his brow as she did so.

When he opened his eyes again, there was an odd, blank look on his face, like all emotion had been somehow leached away. Her brows furrowed, as she regarded him curiously, while his eyes searched hers impersonally.

“Harry?” Her voice quavered from one syllable to the next. She could hear the Order members stir restlessly, anxiously behind her. “Wait!” She cried, thrusting a hand, palm out, in their direction.

“Mudblood bitch,” Harry said, in a low voice, as calmly as if that were her name, and yet the epithet carried an unmistakable air of menace.

“Stun him! It’s not him!” Ron called out, horror fringing around the edges of his tone, giving voice to their worst fear, that somehow

Voldemort would take over his mind, as he had attempted to do in the Department of Mysteries fifth year.

“Wait!” Hermione cried, struggling to infuse authority into her voice. Harry sat up, and she poised on the balls of her feet, her eyes furtively going to her wand on the side table, gauging the distance between it and her.

He groaned again, a strangled moan of agony that seemed torn from the very depths of him. Hermione watched his face carefully; this was different, this was not the wild, disorganized attempt at flight that they normally quelled with the potion, but something going on internally, something that had so far not been directed at them – until he’d spoken to her. His face seemed to be shuttling frenetically from one extreme emotion to another, as he desperately fought for control of his own mind.

His body bowed up on one side, as if he were having some kind of seizure, and one arm shot out wildly. It happened so quickly, and with a force that Hermione did not expect from one who’d been all but immobile for the better part of a month. The back of his hand and side of his arm caught Hermione across the jaw with a resounding crack, and sent her flying backwards into the metal base and undercarriage of the adjacent bed. She fell full-length, hitting first with her hip and ribs, and then her shoulder and the side of her face. She closed her eyes, as dizziness washed through her. Her ears were ringing.

“Hermione!” Ron had squeaked out a horrified cry, when she’d rocketed backwards. He knelt at her side, as she blearily opened her eyes. Just over his shoulder, she saw Remus and Tonks exchange glances and raise their wands.

“Stop!”

“Hermione, he’s dangerous. He’s clearly not himself,” Remus argued. “If we Stun him, then Penelope can administer the potion.”

“Are you all right?” Ron asked. Nausea surged up in her, wetting her mouth, but she swallowed with difficulty.

“Don’t! Please!” she pleaded, as she struggled to stand. Ron looped his hand through hers to help her up, but the room still spun wildly around her. The side of her face felt like it was on fire. “I know him, and I’m telling you he is fighting this. The Circle wants control, but he’s fighting back. If we put him under now, he may lose his advantage, everything he’s gained so far.”

“He – he just hit you,” Ron managed to say, as Madam Pomfrey worked her way forward to assess the injuries. Hermione flinched away from the examining wand, half-afraid, even now, of what a scan might show the mediwitch.

“He didn’t mean to. It’s – it’s a battle for control. Don’t Stun him – just yet.” She looked on Remus and Tonks with beseeching eyes.

“Hermione...” Remus’ tone was dubious. She followed his gaze back to Harry, who was beginning to rise. On his knees near the foot of the bed, he raised both arms, palms out, and moved forward slowly, seemingly oblivious to his wide-eyed audience, warily waiting.

He’s trying to see where the wards begin, Hermione thought.

“Just a little longer, Remus, please,” she said, though she never took her eyes off Harry. “I’m out from under the wards now; he can’t come through, can’t hurt anybody if we just stay back.” Remus’ shoulders lowered slightly in acquiescence, but neither he nor Tonks lowered their wands.

Harry’s hands had come in contact with the wards, and they shimmered slightly at his touch, like the rainbow ripples in an oil leak. He pushed forward further, and the shimmer turned into a glow. Hermione could tell by the tension in his neck, shoulders, and arms that he was straining against the wards with all the strength he had.

Alarms began to wail.

The wards began to spark.

“He’s not going to take them down single-handedly?” Ron murmured it questioningly, in a tone of disbelief.

The lighting in the cavern flickered brightly, then dimmed. Hermione could hear the clamor of questions, as other residents approached the infirmary.

“He’s got to be stopped, Hermione,” Tonks told her. “He could dismantle the entire network!”

Hermione felt herself wilt a little, her shoulders drooping, as she slumped onto Ron. Tonks took her dejected posture as concession, and she raised her wand in tandem with Remus Lupin.

Harry had gotten one hand completely through the wards now; it groped blindly against the forcefield, and Hermione could see that the skin was red and blistered. He did not appear to be registering any pain, but merely watched his hand skim the protesting wards with an air of detached fascination.

Remus and Tonks were going to fire any second, Hermione knew, staring with an air of helpless transfixion. He is trying to beat this; I know he is, was the compelling thought resounding in her head.

“Ron, help me push into Harry’s mind,” she said in a low, insistent whisper, whirling on her best friend, whose mouth gaped at her.

“Hermione?” he said in a voice of disbelief, as if questioning her very sanity.

“Ron, do it, now!”

There was a look of resignation in Ron’s face, and she thought he was going to refuse, but then he responded so quickly that she barely had time to close her eyes and concentrate on her husband.

Time seemed to slow to a crawl, as she envisioned herself reaching outside of herself, stretching across a gap, bridging the distance between her mind and Harry’s floundering one. She streaked toward him, as surely as a true arrow makes for its target.

Harry! Harry, you’re hurting yourself. Force it back. I know you can.

Harry's mind seemed to be tainted a dull, steel gray, almost as if a low-hanging, polluted mist permeated it. Somewhere, she could hear the otherworldly call of the raven, and she knew that this was the influence of the Circle, insidious and pervasive, tendrils of it snaking into every facet of his mind.

What – what are you doing here? Harry sounded exhausted, his voice ragged and weary. She had broken his concentration; she felt the mist thicken and swirl ominously around her.

Must get out...out...must go back...back...Back! The moaning polyphony of the Circle hissed around Harry's mind, like a desolate wind. Hermione flinched instinctively.

I've come for you, Harry. She imagined herself stretching out a hand for him to take. You can break the Circle. It is within your power. Come back with me, love, please.

There was laughter in the fell aura.

Never...The Circle hissed.

Hermione... Harry's voice was searching, hopeful.

Here! I'm here. Follow my voice, follow my presence. We're going home.

Where is that? He sounded five years old.

You'll see, she told him. Come on, I'll take you there.

I – He was faltering, unsure. Hermione's soul felt leaden; the Circle was casting a pall over everything in Harry's mind, obscuring his thoughts, confusing her way. She felt panic rising in her chest like a swelling bubble, preparing to burst.

Mudblood bitch, the Circle sneered, and Hermione could feel the essence of malevolence, the remnants of the evil intelligence that had created it brought to bear on her.

Get away from him, she told it stalwartly, even as icicles of fear crept in, freezing her retreat.

You can't save him now.

You can't stop me, her shaky consciousness belied the resolution she forced into her voice. I love him. Harry, do you hear me? I love you!

And then she heard Harry's voice again, sad and defeated, laden with regret. The chorus of the Circle pulsed behind it, underneath it, creating a discordant symphony with his words.

That's your misfortune.

The mist in his mind blackened, shrouding her from seeing anything, from realizing her way back to herself. Distantly, she could hear alarms shrieking in protest, people's voices raised in panic, but she didn't know where they were coming from, didn't know which way to go.

She felt herself trying to claw her way through the impenetrable influence of the Circle.

Harry! The despair of the ages was in her voice.

I can't fight it, Hermione. It's too strong.

No, it's not. It's not! Fight it, Harry! Dammit, fight! Was she screaming? She wasn't sure, but she felt raw and worn and drained. The mist was everywhere. The Circle was winning. Voldemort was winning. The Circle would take over Harry, and Harry would go.

Fatigue swept over her, and she knew that she wouldn't be able to fight it either. Dimly, she wished that she could somehow find Harry's self in all this madness, and they could at least surrender to it together...

And you call yourself a Gryffindor? The voice was stern, but laced with fondness. Harry, get your arse up, and come on, before Hermione kills herself trying to save you.

Hermione tried to force herself to understand this sudden turn of events.

And before I do too, the voice added.

Ron? She uttered, in unadulterated astonishment.

The Circle seemed to grow more frenzied now, more desperate; there were too many people, too much influence warring with its own. It surged up over her, crested, broke. White light blinded her; there was a roaring in her ears. Someone was shouting.

She was swept away.

Hermione lay very still, taking stock of every muscle, nerve, and joint. She was lying on something relatively soft – an infirmary bed, she guessed – and there was a deep and lingering ache up and down the length of her right side, as well as both sides of her face, where she'd hit the bed frame and where Harry had hit her. The bed seemed to lurch and bob, giving her the vague sensation that she was floating on an open sea, so she didn't risk opening her eyes just yet.

Gradually, the babbling brook of voices reached her ears, and, after a moment, her foggy brain began to process the sounds into actual language.

"... we do now?" Someone asked.

"Poppy said that Harry had fallen into a natural sleep on his own. All we have to do is wait for him to wake up." This was Penelope speaking; she sounded as if she were on the far end of the infirmary, and there was an accompanying bustle and clink of glass as she moved about.

Hermione felt her heart nearly seize with sudden joy and lightness, subsequently tempered with caution. Could Penelope really mean that Harry is out from under the influence of the Circle?

“Re – really? You’re quite sure?” A third voice stammered this question, and Hermione recognized it instantly.

Ron. His voice sounded thin and hollow, and she recognized that quality too – fear. She did not need to imagine how he felt, as she’d been there quite recently, when both he and Harry had succumbed to injury following their return from the Lake.

“Ron, your friends are very lucky that you came to the rescue when you did,” said Madam Pomfrey, and she sounded near the divider, as if she’d just entered. There was a murmur of assent from McGonagall, which then rose up into a chorus from the other Order members nervously hanging about the infirmary.

“It wasn’t me,” Ron dissented. “Harry did it.” Hermione felt herself stiffen reflexively, and the jolt of movement caused her head to spin. An involuntary groan escaped her lips, and the conversation halted. She heard footfalls, and attempted to open her eyes, but her lids felt impossibly weighty.

“Hermione?” Ron spoke, much closer now. She finally managed to force her eyes open, and saw a blur of ivory face, topped with a shock of vivid hair.

“R – Ron...” She was surprised to hear how feeble her voice sounded. “What happened? How...long...?” She shifted on the bed, planting her hands on the mattress to push herself upright. Her side shrieked in protest.

“No, no, don’t sit up yet,” Madam Pomfrey and Penelope were at the other side of the bed, busily checking her over. Hermione thought she could hazily see Remus and Arthur at the foot of the bed.

“Am I all right?” She asked tentatively, thinking of the baby, and knowing that, as far as the mediwitches were concerned, all hopes of

keeping it to herself any longer were lost. “And – and Harry? Did I hear you say...?”

“You are going to have some lovely bruising, but you’re lucky you didn’t break every rib on your right side. All things considered,” and here Madam Pomfrey paused, and regarded Hermione appraisingly. She knows, Hermione thought, forcing herself to meet the mediwitch’s gaze squarely, swallowing as she did so. “You’ve been very lucky.”

“And Harry?” Hermione repeated, wanting Madam Pomfrey’s penetrating gaze removed from her. From the foot of the bed, Remus sighed.

“We don’t know yet,” he said. “He collapsed at the same time you did. We revamped the wards, in case... in case...” he could not finish. “But Poppy has assured us that Harry’s sleep is completely natural.”

“The first he’s had in weeks...” Madam Pomfrey sniffed.

“Then – then, you think it’s – the Circle’s gone?” Hermione asked eagerly, sitting up in the bed, ignoring Penelope’s muffled protests, as well as those from her battered body and her light head.

“We’ll know more when Harry wakes up, but we’ve had good indications of it,” the werewolf answered. Hermione turned her gaze toward the other bed, where her husband slept, both hands swathed in thick bandages from fingertip to elbow, where they’d been scorched by the wards.

“His hands...” she said sorrowfully, biting her lip, and then looked over her shoulder as something soft was placed behind her back. Ron had elevated the head of her bed slightly, and was positioning extra pillows so that she could recline.

“Just looking at you sitting all hunched over like that was making me achy,” he muttered with mock grumpiness. “Far be it from anyone to tell Hermione Granger to bloody well lie down!” She looked fondly at her other best friend, and the affectionate look turned into a smile, when Madam Pomfrey observed archly,

“Hear, hear!”

“It’s Potter...” she corrected absent-mindedly, feeling a little sleepy again, but then flinched guiltily when Ron froze. He tried to laugh it off.

“Sorry...old habits, you know...” he said, brushing off her murmured apologies, as she gritted her teeth at her own insensitivity.

“What did you mean, Harry did it?” she asked suddenly, as she remembered Ron’s comment. She was also grateful that the question banished the naked, longing look in his blue eyes.

“You – you went into Harry’s mind, and I – I helped you go, but didn’t go myself. I – I guess I hoped to be your anchor, but I could tell it was going badly. I lost my hold on your mind almost immediately, and Harry was screaming. Wards were blowing all over the place, and then – then you collapsed...” She reached out and took Ron’s hand compassionately, as she saw the worry relived in his face. “So, I took a chance, and followed you into Harry’s mind, hoping that maybe I – maybe I could get you both out. It’s a wonder I found either one of you. Can’t believe that Harry hasn’t gone mad, with all that in his head. Damn shrieking birds.”

“And you got us out?” Hermione said, a tone of wonder and gratitude in her voice. One corner of Ron’s mouth turned up in a regretful smile, as if he wished he could take credit for it.

“No. You were so close – I thought I might actually get to you before everything went to hell. But then, I lost you – that mist was everywhere, and I really thought we were all going to die, but then – then there was this – ”

“White light...” Hermione remembered, and Ron nodded.

“It was Harry. He just – he just sent out this ... wave of power, and – and it – it was like it purged everything. Must have shoved us out of the way too, because the next thing I know, I was on my arse between the beds, with you on top of me. Harry dropped like a rock; neither of you were breathing worth anything for awhile...”

"But he's going to be okay...?" She whispered, clasping her hands in her lap, and watching Harry with hungry eyes.

"We think so, Mrs. Potter," Madam Pomfrey said. "Now I really do suggest that you get some rest." Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but the mediwitch continued speaking, "I promise that we will wake you the moment Mr. Potter stirs."

Hermione let herself relax against the pillows, and opened her mouth obediently when Penelope spooned something in. Almost immediately, the nagging pain that plagued her right side subsided.

A murmured spell caught her attention, and she lifted her head to see Ron Levitating a chair in between her and Harry's beds. He noticed her curious glance, and lifted one shoulder self-consciously.

"Thought I'd sit with you both for awhile." Hermione felt the corners of her eyes crinkle in the barest of smiles.

"Thanks, Ron..." she breathed, feeling herself slipping into sleep. Quietly, as if from very far away, she heard him reply,

"Always, Hermione."

When she awakened again, the infirmary was still dim, but she could tell by the lighting in the cavern proper that it was well into the next day. She sat up quickly, cursed, slumped back down, and then looked across at Harry. He had not stirred. Peering over the twin bumps her feet made under the sheet, she saw that Ron slouched awkwardly in the chair, his head and neck hunched to one side, sleeping.

"Ron!" she hissed, trying to keep her voice down. "Ron!" On the second call, he snorted and began to stir. He blinked at her, and a smile crossed his face when he realized she was the one who'd called him.

"Hey, you're awake," he said, unnecessarily.

"How long was I out?" she asked.

"I stayed awake for a few hours," Ron said. "Remus brought me some Order stuff to work on." He shrugged a little, and looked chagrined. "It didn't take me long to fall asleep doing that." He looked over his shoulder, and must have spotted his brother, for he cried out, "Oy, Fred! What time is it?"

Hermione instinctively tried to hush him, fearful of disturbing Harry, and missed Fred's reply.

"Fred says it's almost noon. What?" He smiled slightly, as she flapped her hands at him to be quiet. "Don't you want him to wake up?" He slanted an unreadable look at her. "Reckon you have some things to tell him." Hermione froze, moving only her eyes to warily meet Ron's.

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked, trying to keep her voice bland, but failing quite spectacularly.

"You know exactly what I mean, Hermione."

"Did Madam Pomfrey – ?" She asked angrily. She wasn't sure of the exact laws, but there had to be some wizarding statutes guarding medical privacy. She was already preparing a tirade in her mind, when Ron cut her off.

"She hasn't said anything. I saw it – the – the baby... in your mind... you know...earlier...Didn't mean to," He trailed off, staring at his shoes. His shoulders were rigid. When he finally looked back up at her, sorrow was stamped across his face. She figured he was thinking regretfully about what might have been, but he said,

"Merlin's beard, Hermione! What were you thinking?"

"Excuse me?" Hermione said, her tone dangerous, even though she didn't quite understand what had upset him so.

"Now? Of all the times to have a baby – are you crazy? Don't tell me that Harry agreed to go along with this?"

“It was an accident! And how dare you insinuate that I would make a decision like that without telling Harry,” she snapped, as a nagging voice reminded her that she had contemplated many actions without telling Harry – in fact, had no immediate plans to tell Harry about the baby at all. Resolutely, she pushed that voice aside, with no small amount of guilt.

“Accident?” Ron looked bewildered. Hermione reflected that accidents must be much rarer in the Wizarding world than she’d previously thought.

“I was – I was so scared when Fleur told me – I – I couldn’t believe it was true... didn’t want to believe that it was true.” Ron looked like he wanted to apologize, but wasn’t quite sure how to go about it.

“And Harry – ?” he asked. Hermione shook her head.

“There hasn’t been a chance to tell him. And – and truthfully... I’m not sure I’d have told him, even if there had been opportunity.”

“Hermione!” Ron sounded scandalized. “You can’t not tell him.”

“And what happens when I tell him, Ron, hmmm? What happens then?”

“Well,” Ron drew the word out, trying to think of a satisfactory response. “First, he’ll have kittens about it, then he’ll be happy, then he’ll drive everyone batty worrying over you. He’s going to keep you from going out on missions, that’s for sure. How long have you known?” Hermione averted her eyes.

“Almost a month,” she said hastily. “But that’s not the point. You’re right, you know. All it’s going to do is make him worry. Worry and feel even guiltier than he already does. More guilt, more pressure – that’s the last thing he needs.”

“The last thing he needs is people hiding things from him,” Ron observed astutely. “Remember what happened the last time somebody did that?”

"I can't help him if I'm kept shut up in here!"

"Yes, you can! Do you think Ginny and Fleur just sit round looking dainty all day long? Ginny even went – " He stopped, evidently deciding that bringing up Ginny's trip out the day before wouldn't really advance his argument. "There's plenty that you can do. Developing new spells won't require you to leave the cave – and we're going to need every advantage your brilliant brain can give us, you know."

"I – I just – " she tried to protest.

"What is this really about, Hermione?" Ron was studying her with narrowed eyes. "Are you worried about what Harry's going to say? Are you afraid people will think you screwed up the charm?" At that question, she pierced him with a sizzling glare, which he deflected with a slight grin. "Or are you afraid of being left behind?"

The words stung, and she drew herself upright, lifting her chin defensively.

"Don't be ridiculous," she said shortly. But he looked at her so long and knowingly that her façade crumbled without much resistance. "You two are so reckless – and – and you'll probably rush into something without thinking things through, and I – I – " She threw her arms up and flung them down into her lap in frustration.

"You're not giving any of us much credit, are you? Sideline Hermione Granger, and the wizarding world is doomed..." Ron was chiding her, but his voice was gentle.

"Tell me I'm not that arrogant," she mumbled, as she lowered her face into her hands.

"You're the most intelligent person I've ever had the privilege to be around," Ron said honestly. "But that doesn't mean that everyone else here is a Troll."

“I never thought – ” she began, and then finally admitted the truth, to herself and to her best friend. “We were going to the end together. We all promised...”

“I don’t think Harry’ll hold you to that promise,” Ron remarked.

“If he – if he doesn’t – ” She couldn’t give voice to the dread that she’d never even spoken of to Harry.

“With you and a baby waiting for him – there’s no way Harry won’t come back victorious. You may have just saved us all.” He spoke lightly, with his eyebrows raised, but there was pain lurking in the shadows of his eyes.

“It’s terribly unfair of me to have unloaded this all on you,” she admitted, after a moment.

“You needed to tell somebody,” Ron said simply.

“Thank you,” she replied, unsure of what else to say. So she held out her arms to him, and he came into the embrace, folding his arms around her carefully. The contact alone was enough to make her flinch, and he noticed. “I’ll go tell Penelope you’re awake,” he said. Hermione could tell by the shutters that had lowered over his eyes that he considered the discussion over.

As he left, she folded her hands together, and pressed them against her mouth, thinking furiously. Could she really tell Harry? The rest of the Order? How long could she really keep it from them anyway? And if she didn’t, and was injured somehow out on a mission on which she had no business being, would she ever forgive herself? Would Harry ever forgive her?

“Hermione?” Tonks poked her bright pink head around the edge of the divider. “Feel up to some company?”

“Sure,” Hermione nodded, more enthusiastically than she actually felt. Her mind was still churning with uncertainty about what to do next.

“And maybe some analysis?” Tonks hedged, holding up a vial.

“Okay...” Hermione said quizzically, and the Auror made her way to the bedside, handing her the vial. “What is it?”

“It’s whatever was left, after whatever it was that happened to you and Harry,” Tonks said, not very coherently.

“What ever was left?” Hermione turned the vial over and over in her hands. It swirled and frothed with a charcoal mist that seemed to suck away all light that touched it. Even the surface of the glass did not gleam in the dim light of the infirmary, but instead felt cold. Hermione was suddenly loath to touch it, and let it slip through her fingers to rest softly on her mattress.

“Lovely stuff, isn’t it?” Tonks asked rhetorically, noticing her reaction of distaste.

“This was – this was in Harry’s mind – or at least, this was the way he was visualizing it – the influence of the Circle, the call of it. It was obscuring things, hiding things, twisting and distorting, trying to get him to come to it.” Her brows were furrowed, and her words tumbled out disjointedly, as she tried to express what she’d seen in inadequate language. “So – so if it’s here, then...”

“Do you think that means that it’s left Harry?”

Hermione’s eyes all but glazed over, as she continued to think aloud.

“If Harry was fighting it... and he won – then perhaps he was able to counter the pull of the Circle so forcefully that – that he pulled it here.” Tonks regarded the vial with new wariness at Hermione’s words.

“Then we’re lucky that Fred was thinking quick on his feet, and bottled it up before it dispersed,” she remarked. “As it was, it spread quite a mood over everyone. You, Ron, and Harry were well out of it, but it felt – it felt rather like a Dementor, only there wasn’t just fear, but anger, panic, hatred, despair.” Hermione all too well remembered those feelings from her sojourn inside Harry’s mind. Tonks shook her head after ruminating for a moment, and added, “I think Susan called

me a rather nasty name.”

“I’d love to get a better look at this – under controlled conditions,” Hermione mused. “I bet Fred would too.”

“Oh, he’s been itching to get his hands on it,” Tonks affirmed. “But we made him wait on you.” Hermione smiled a little, and sighed.

“I guess all that remains is to wait and see what Harry’s like when he wakes up. If this – if this – ” she looked up hopefully at Tonks, and she knew that her heart was in her eyes. “If this is fixed now, and Harry is fine, then – then... Tonks, I’ve missed him so much. There’s so much I need to tell him.”

“Well, tell him then,” said another voice, in a delightfully throaty growl, “because he’s awake.”

Hermione felt herself draw a quick, sharp breath into her lungs, and it seemed that the action simultaneously caused her heart to skip a beat and her eyes to well with tears.

“How are you feeling?” she whispered with a watery smile.

“Like I’ve been asleep for a thousand years, having very bad dreams,” Harry said, with a faraway look in his eyes. “There was a – a raven... and a voice. What happened to you?”

“Nothing. I fell,” Hermione said casually, dismissing his concern. She barely noticed Tonks slipping from the room.

“I hit you,” he corrected her, with realization in his voice.

“You weren’t yourself.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for, Harry. I’m fine. How – how’s the pull?” He paused for a moment, once again doing some internal monitoring.

"It's gone," he said, with dawning wonder. "It's gone. Did you – you and Ron – ?" He was speaking slowly, still trying to fill in the blanks and comprehend the sequence of events.

"You did it, Harry. You broke the Circle's hold – and probably saved my and Ron's life, while you were at it."

"I thought it was over," he murmured. "I thought it had won, and then – then I felt it overwhelm you, and I – I knew I couldn't let anything happen to you..."

Hermione felt a smile warm her face, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

"I've missed you, love," she said, in a voice that was hoarse with tears. She reached across the gap to grasp his hand, and he met her halfway.

"I missed you too. More than you know," he responded. "Now what was it you were going to tell me?"

Her heart leapt into her throat, as she opened her mouth to speak, frantically searching for the right words to use, but she never got the chance, as Ginny, Fred, Susan, and several of the others entered the infirmary, herded through the doorway by Madam Pomfrey, who immediately moved to Harry's bedside to evaluate him.

"Harry!" Ginny exclaimed, her face lighting up with a smile. "Tonks said you were awake. It's nice to hear your real voice again."

"Thank you," Harry replied sincerely. His eyes slid questioningly to Hermione's, but she dropped her gaze to her hands in her lap.

"It's nice to have a little good news," the red-head continued. "Especially after what happened yesterday..." Hermione recalled that she'd never heard about Ginny's reconnaissance mission, and looked up curiously, in spite of herself.

"What happened yesterday?" Harry asked.

“We went to Diagon Alley just to listen and watch, find out what people were saying. We heard about a disturbance at the Ministry, so we decided to check it out, and nearly got caught in a riot.”

“There was a riot?” Harry echoed, his hopeful tone making the idea of a riot sound oddly positive.

“Maybe twenty or twenty-five witches and wizards marched on the Ministry. Evidently supply lines have been disrupted all over the country. Food has been hard to find for some, and the Galleon’s lost almost all its value. These people decided to let Voldemort know how unhappy they were with the way he’s been running things.” Ginny’s face was grim.

“What happened?” Harry asked hollowly, as if he really did not want to know, but was asking for form’s sake. Ginny sniffed loudly, and didn’t continue. Fred picked up the thread of the story.

“Death Eaters came out with a child of one of the leaders – little girl, looked about four years old. I don’t know how they figured out where to find her. They demanded that the leader recant and apologize, or the child would be killed. So he did – he was on his knees, sobbing, pleading for mercy, swearing his allegiance – he even offered to take the Mark.”

Harry’s face was a blend of disgust and pity. The youngest Weasley spoke again.

“The Death Eater accepted the apology, and then used Avada Kedavra on the child anyway. The way that father screamed – I’m – I’m glad I couldn’t see it. I don’t think I’ll ever forget the way it sounded.” Ginny’s face was blank with horror.

“He was an idiot!” Harry exclaimed suddenly, startling everyone in the room. “Why didn’t he try to find us – find someone who could help him make a difference – a real difference? Did he really think he could protest against Voldemort without consequences – or that it would do any good? Did he think that Voldemort wouldn’t use someone he loved against him? He should have packed his little girl off somewhere secret a thousand miles away! And then contacted us.

Voldemort's going to have to be dealt with on a battlefield, not in a political forum!"

Everyone in the room was staring at him, including Hermione, while Harry continued to mutter something about stupid, useless wastes.

"What – what happened to the father?" Hermione asked Ginny, not removing her eyes from Harry.

"They killed every single one of the protesters," Ginny informed her slowly. "And they saved him for last." Hermione made a strangled kind of sound in the back of her throat.

"Twenty-five people who were brave enough to march against tyranny," Harry said, looking on the verge of exploding again. "We could have used them! We could have – and that little girl – dear God. Senseless, stupid, pointless..."

"Mr. Potter, will you please calm yourself?" Madam Pomfrey remonstrated, prodding him none too gently with her wand. "And Miss Weasley, need I remind you that you've needed dosing with Calming Draught since you got back? I would think that you wouldn't want to rehash that again."

Hermione felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. To her, it appeared that Harry had made quite clear his feelings about children caught up in this conflict. How could she ever tell him now?

TBC

AN: Many, many apologies for the long delay in this update. We are getting closer to the end, and it's getting harder to make sure I've got everything lined up the way I want it in preparation for the end.

I hope you enjoyed it. I rather liked the Circle scene, but I'm not sure about the rest of the chapter.

You may leave a review on your way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Twenty-Three: Yule

“They’re back,” Hermione said, when Seamus and Megan reappeared in the central portion of the cavern. “We’re up next.” She looked sidewise at Blaise as she said it, lifting one shoulder, trying not to reveal how little she looked forward to this – Christmas Eve in the trenches.

Or at least, up in one of the lookouts in the Forbidden Forest.

So far, perching up there was only cold and boring. Random Death Eaters – probably cloned – had meandered back and forth in straggly groups, and one could only wonder whether or not their movements were as purposeless as they seemed. Ron and Luna had taken enormous pleasure in conjuring a gigantic flock of apparently deranged blackbirds to descend upon a large shipment of potion ingredients. The Silencio charm placed around the platform prevented the bewildered servants of the Dark Lord from hearing peals of hysterical laughter, as they danced around, shouting furious curses at the surprisingly adroit birds that systematically shredded their cargo.

Ron had told Hermione later, still wiping tears from his eyes, that they had seemed almost fearful of what they carried, and that the fear had increased to paranoid panic as it was ruined by the birds.

“His Circle is broken; he must have realized that by now,” Hermione had mused. “It could have been part of the ritual to reconstruct it.”

“You may have done more good than you know,” Remus had added, clapping an even more heartened Ron on the shoulder.

Hermione was moving toward the place where the cave yielded itself to the Lake, a more or less unofficial arrival and departure point, but was jarred from her own recollections when she realized that Blaise was not following her.

“Zabini?” she asked questioningly, old habit causing his surname to slip from her tongue. She tried not to sound impatient; the new shifts for the other two lookouts had already departed.

"You've been given the night off, Hermione," Fleur said lightly, approaching them and casually twining her arm with Zabini's. The façade that this was somehow friendly happenstance did not fool Hermione, and her eyes narrowed suspiciously at the half-Veela.

"Come off it, Fleur," Hermione said, trying to laugh, adopting Fleur's idea that this had nothing whatever to do with her condition. "Zabini and I drew short straw; we've got watch for Christmas Eve. Besides, you can't mean to go."

"If you can go, surely I could, Hermione." Fleur's voice was all sugar and honey, and did not really answer the question. Hermione flinched, flicking a warning glance toward Blaise. The cryptic comment was hitting too close to home.

"Take yourself off your high-horse, Granger," Zabini said, not unkindly, apparently only half-listening to her conversation with Fleur. "We all talked it over, and agreed that you should not have to take watch tonight."

"You all talked it over?" Hermione had only just restrained her voice from becoming a shriek. Her heart began slamming itself against the wall of her chest at a rapid clip. The look she shot the other mother-to-be was one of unmitigated betrayal.

"Reckoned you might want to spend the holiday with your husband," Blaise replied laconically, nodding at something just over Hermione's shoulder.

She twisted around, feeling almost as if she was going in slow motion, and her eyes locked with Harry's, as he stood leaning against the support post of the divider that marked the entrance to the infirmary. He was thin, still painfully so, and there were shadows beneath his eyes that Hermione wasn't sure would ever go away, but he was there, real, alive, and evidently, released from the mediwitches' care.

He smiled almost self-consciously, dipping his head, and a lock of unruly hair fell like a raven brushstroke across his forehead. Hermione felt suddenly shy, felt acutely aware of the presence of

Blaise and Fleur at her elbow. They had been married for mere days before he'd been injured – and there was now this enormous News that loomed between them, even if Harry had no idea it was there. She swallowed.

"I think you would both benefit from using this time wisely," Fleur said serenely, unmistakable meaning in her eyes. Blaise, misunderstanding the implications, snorted, as Cho Chang appeared, out of breath, and murmured something about being ready to go.

Hermione was already moving toward Harry, as one transfixed. She did not even notice them leave.

"I didn't know Madam Pomfrey was discharging you today," she murmured, half-laughing as she did so. A discharge was only a matter of meters, after all.

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Harry said, cupping her jawline with one hand, gazing at her raptly, thirstily, yearningly.

"Christmas present?" She teased.

"Actually, I was planning on digging some of the Potter jewelry out of the vault for you. Only I hadn't got around to it when – " Hermione was shaking her head, putting one finger over the aggrieved apology hovering on his lips.

"Having you back again, healthy, is present enough, Harry Potter," she whispered, and brushed a kiss over his slightly parted lips. She was rewarded with an almost feral light that sprang to life in his eyes, one that sent a corresponding rush of warmth through the center of her abdomen.

He threaded his fingers through hers, and she looked down at his hand twined with hers, outlining with her thumb the faint pink scars that pushing through the wards had branded onto his hands. He followed her gaze.

"We match," he whispered, and the corners of her eyes crinkled in a smile, as they moved with forced casualness toward the dividers that

delineated their room. Nobody appeared to be paying the slightest bit of attention to them, though Hermione was hardly naïve enough to think that there wasn't someone marking Harry's whereabouts at all times.

They were only just through the shimmering membrane of the divider, which obligingly faded to opaque gray once they'd entered, before Harry's mouth was on hers, hot, demanding, hungry, his hands bracketing her face. She'd barely had time to react, before she realized that he was saying something, murmuring grunted words of entreaty between the frantic, heated joinings of their mouths.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry," was his mantra. She stepped away from him slightly, her dark eyes quizzical.

"For what?"

"For not – for not being there, for – for succumbing to that damned Circle, for – for – Merlin, I don't know! It feels like – like it's been years, not weeks. It feels like – like everything's changed somehow... you – you seem different, and you can't be different... so that means something must be wrong with me, and – what if I – " He was babbling, speaking rapidly, almost incoherently, as he gazed at a point just adjacent to her upper arm, and his fingers played absently in the hem of her sweater. One phrase had stricken her to her core.

You seem different.

Dear Merlin, was she that easy to read? She knew what Fleur had meant with her last words, knew that the young widow had reached the end of her patience, and would be expecting some disclosure from Hermione, especially now that the Circle had been removed from contention as an obstacle, a Wand Bond – at least for the present – not immediately necessary.

"I'm – I'm still me, Harry." A tremulous smile played on her lips, as part of her still shied away from actually opening her mouth and speaking the words. Talking about it makes it real, some irrational part of her stubbornly said.

"I know," he said, and something akin to peace skimmed across his countenance, as he scooped her into his arms, and buried his face in the crook of her neck and shoulder. She went rigid initially, wondering what he would say at the feel of her body flush against his, even though changes were as yet unnoticeable to the eye, when under clothing. She relaxed gradually when nothing in his stance seemed to change.

He inhaled deeply of her scent, and moved back to worshipping her lips with his own again, this time, slowly, tenderly and reverently.

"I've missed you so much, Hermione. Even when it – the – when the Circle was trying –trying – you know – even when you were right there beside me, it was always—always trying to make me believe you were gone." Something of the lost little boy echoed in his voice again, and she pulled him closer, running her fingers through the dark hair at the nape of his neck.

"I would never leave you, Harry," she whispered, kissing him back with all the love she could express. When she pulled back, something was glinting in his eyes; he played along her jaw and neck with light touches of his fingertips.

"That's what kept me going," he admitted simply, and she felt tears suffuse her eyes so that they shone like his own.

"I'm glad," she said, and unspoken in her tone was, let's not talk about that anymore. They kissed again, and the fiery intent was back. His hands left her face and neck, and roved down her back, caressing, swirling, searching...

They reached the rolled hem of her sweater again, and moved beneath it, questing and intent. Hermione disconnected from him suddenly, careening backwards, with panic stamped all over her face, afraid of what his roaming hands might discover.

"Wait!" she cried involuntarily, before she even realized she was going to say anything. She collided with the edge of the mattress, and sat down abruptly. Harry's face fell momentarily, before concern flared in his eyes.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, coming to sit on the bed beside her. He placed one hand on her arm, peering round to try to see into her eyes. She averted them, sure that he would be able to read her entire soul there, and shifted away from his touch. It was Harry, and she'd missed him, and they were sitting on their bed...

She closed her eyes against the hurt she knew she'd see in Harry's, at her recoil.

"Did I – did I do something wrong?" The question was tentative, somehow hopeful, and it made Hermione feel worse than ever.

"Of course you didn't," she said automatically, and then tried to temper the impatience in her voice – that was really irritation with herself – with a weary sigh.

Now or never, Granger. Are you a Gryffindor or aren't you?

"I just can't – I can't concentrate when you're touching me, and there's something – " Deep shuddering lungfuls of oxygen; there suddenly didn't seem to be enough air in the room. "There's something I need to tell you." She curled her fingers inward on her lap, and studied with detachment the white crescents of her fingernails.

"Something is wrong," Harry said. "What is it?" He seemed to be steeling himself for some kind of blow, and Hermione was not sure herself what exactly he thought this blow would entail.

"When – when we came back from the Circle, we – we were – anyway, I discovered something..." Discovered something, she wanted to wince at her own inane and clinical-sounding words. "I – I certainly didn't intend for this to happen, and it was – it was such a shock that I – I didn't know quite how to tell you, I didn't know what you'd do, and – "

"For God's sake, Hermione, spit it out!" He said raggedly, and she looked up to notice that his face was white to the lips. Her brow creased with concern, and it was her turn to lay a hand on his arm.

“Harry?”

“Is it – is it over?” He spoke with effort, and it took a moment for Hermione to process what exactly he meant.

“God, no, Harry! Do you think that after all this – after all we’ve been through – do you really think I’d – no! I love you – and only you – and I’ll do so until the day that I die.” Guilt rocketed through her at the thought that she had frightened him, worried him, shaken his foundations on his first day back – all because she was too much of a coward to tell it to him straight.

She closed her eyes in a long, determined blink, and opened them to look unswervingly at her husband. She took another slow, steady breath.

“We’re – I’m – we’re going to have a baby, Harry,” she finally said, her eyes skittering off over his shoulder at the last minute, appearing to study the doorpost with great interest.

Out of her peripheral vision, she saw him shift, felt the mattress move beneath them. He said,

“Wh – what?”

Her lower jaw vibrated suddenly with her effort to speak, and she clamped her teeth together with an audible clack.

“You heard me,” she said succinctly, struggling to maintain control over the muscles in her face, which seemed to want to waver and melt all over the place, launched out of control by the force of her emotions.

“I – I don’t understand...” he said. His voice was low, monotone, almost as if he was focused on something else, and the words were slipping out without his concentration or permission.

She looked at him then, slowly and with agony, as if her eyes were magnets wanting to repel themselves from Harry’s. She saw his

Adam's apple bob up and down beneath the skin of his neck as he swallowed unevenly.

There was no anger in his face, no disgust, no condemnation, no annoyance.

There was just fear.

Blanching, naked, nauseated, wet-the-bed fear.

And Hermione knew it was fear for her, fear for their child.

"What you're thinking..." she said quietly. "It isn't anything that I haven't already thought."

"Oh, God," he said, clearly seeing the thousands of horrible ways his family could be destroyed, as they had been the first time, when he was too young to even remember. "Oh, God." His head went down into his hands, fingers threading through his hair, his gaze somewhere between his knees.

"I know, Harry. I know." She leaned into his side, putting her head on his shoulder, touching him for the first time since she'd sprung from his side. "I'm sorry."

Those two words seemed to ignite a reaction in him, and he looked at her sharply.

"For what?" It was his turn to ask.

"For – for this," she replied. "The timing – well, it couldn't be worse, and – and I –"

"Don't apologize for this," he said, somewhat incoherently. "Not for this. I just – I just –" His eyes bounced down to her lap almost imperceptibly, and then shot upward to her face. "I just hope to Merlin that I can keep you safe." He drew in a deep, noisy breath, much as she had earlier. "Both of you." He pushed her hair back from her face with one hand, shook his head, and closed his eyes as if in pain.

“But I – I can’t – ” He stopped, struggled to articulate what he meant, swore, and then stood up, moving restlessly around the perimeter of the small room.

“You can’t what?” she prodded.

“I can’t promise you that, Hermione. I can’t promise anything. I – what kind of father – I can’t even keep a baby safe – can’t keep anybody safe. I – you – ” He raked his hair away from his forehead with one trembling hand.

“I haven’t asked you for any promises, Harry,” Hermione said softly. “Only that you love me. We’ve been through this before... I know there are no guarantees.”

“But it’s different now.”

And she knew he was right. They had raised the stakes, however unwittingly. It was not only their lives being placed on the line now, and in the embryonic stages of forming a family, they had given Voldemort yet another advantage.

“It only means that we’ve more incentive to get through this alive,” she said, not flippantly, but sincerely. He turned back toward her, and drank her in with his brilliant eyes. The fear was still there, but tempered with some kind of longing and – dare she even think it? – hope.

“How – how far...?”

“Nearly fourteen weeks,” she murmured, in answer to his abbreviated question.

“Fourteen...” Hermione could tell the number meant little to him. She doubted if he was even aware of how long a normal pregnancy lasted.

“I should – I should be feeling movement soon,” she ventured. “It – the baby is due in – toward the end of May, I think.”

“You think? Hasn’t – hasn’t Penelope or Madam Pomfrey – ?”

"I – I haven't been to see them about it yet." The admission shamed her, and she dropped her gaze to the toes of her trainers.

"Why not?"

"I didn't want anyone to know. I wasn't – I – "

"You don't want it," he supplied for her. She whipped her eyes up to his face, but now he was studiously avoiding looking at her.

"I want it more than anything in the world." Her voice was low, but heavy with sincerity and meaning. It dropped into the stillness of the room, and seemed to reverberate in the corners. "Why – why wouldn't I want it? Your baby? If ... if it's half as special as its father..."

Hermione had braced herself back on one arm, but moved the other one to rest on her abdomen, her fingers wandering over the newly acquired firmness there. A sudden noise jolted her attention upward again, as she belatedly realized that Harry had swallowed back a sob.

"Harry?" she breathed out in alarm, but had no opportunity to say anything further, as he came back to her side, and knelt down in front of her. The tears were shining in his eyes.

"I love you, Hermione Granger Potter," he said, fierce and low. "And I'm not going to lie to you by saying that I'm nothing but thrilled. I'm not going to lie by denying that I'm completely and utterly terrified about what this – this baby means for the Order, for me, for you, and for the war... but – but I – " He gripped her hands tightly between the tips of his fingers, and drew them up to his mouth, kissing them gently. He had protested his ability to make promises, and she had claimed she didn't need them, but he seemed to be compelled to make a vow anyway. "I – I will do what I can."

His eyes were blazing, and Hermione thought suddenly and incongruously of her conversation with Ron.

You may have saved us all.

“Ron said – Ron said you’d have kittens...” she said absently, in a breathless kind of way. Harry rocked back on his heels, and cocked his head up at her.

“Ron knows?” he asked.

Damn.

“I – I didn’t tell him,” she said quickly. “He saw it – in my mind, the night you... threw off the Circle.”

“How was he?”

“He seemed okay. He said I should tell you straight away...seemed to think that it would – would galvanize you to – that winning would be a sure thing, if you had a child to protect.”

Harry seemed oddly touched.

“He said that? Really?”

At her nod, he turned his attention back to her waist, which happened to be on his eye level as he knelt before her. Gently, he lifted her sweater, exposing the tautness of her belly that had not quite progressed into protrusion. His fingers warmly skimmed over the skin, and her breathing hitched.

“I can’t believe...” he whispered, in a voice of awe and reverence and unworthiness.

“Believe it, Harry,” she whispered back. “I love you so very much, and we – we made a baby...us, together...even now...” The amazement in her voice mirrored his. He leaned forward and brushed her stomach with his lips, and her abdominal muscles quivered involuntarily.

“Harry...” Her voice was uneven when it came out, and it cracked in the middle, as she tugged on his shoulders, pulling him up to where they were face to face. Her mouth fastened to his, as pent up passion

and desire flared around them like rekindled flame, and his hands delved the rest of the way into her already hiked up sweater.

They collapsed onto the bed, and Hermione noticed that Harry was excruciatingly careful not to put his weight on her, but instead slid to the side. She arched one leg between his, hooked it behind his knee, and pulled their hips together.

“Are you – can you – ?” Harry sounded as if he was not getting enough air. Hands were everywhere, and clothing was being rapidly discarded. Hermione breathlessly remembered to cast a Silencing charm.

“Did you know that the second trimester is often called the honeymoon trimester?” she asked, gazing at him through heavy-lidded eyes, as his fingers swooped and swirled over her hips.

He grunted a response, as he turned onto his back, and pulled her up to straddle him in one fluid motion.

“We never did have a proper honeymoon.”

Hermione supposed, as she untwined herself slowly and reluctantly from Harry’s slumbering form, that – all things considered – the disclosure had gone quite well. He’d been too shocked by the news to be overly angry at any perceived errors in handling on her part, and he’d missed her too much to get terribly worked up over it. He had been under the Circle’s influence the entire time she’d known of the pregnancy, and, while there had been windows of opportunity in which she could have told him, they had been sporadic and quick to disappear.

She had told him, and he hadn’t run for the hills, hadn’t shouted angry reprisals. He had cried and told her he loved her, and backed up his words with the most tender of actions. She reached out with one hand, and gently brushed her fingers through the ebony hair that tumbled across his arm, where it cradled his cheek.

He stirred, mumbled something unintelligible, and reached for her again, pulling her into his embrace, though his eyes never opened.

She snuggled down into his arms, languidly watching her fingers as they created small pearly wakes in the darkness of his hair.

When she looked back at him, his eyes were open and gazing at her, and she started. He pulled her to him, and kissed an apology into her hair, but not before she'd seen the brooding worry lurking deep in the shadows of his eyes.

"How have you been feeling?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep, but concerned nonetheless.

"I've been fine. There's been a little sickness, but it hasn't been that bad really." She could see the regret that he hadn't been there for her, and she hastened to speak before he could express it. "I assure you, I'm quite healthy. Fleur – well, Fleur's the one who actually diagnosed the whole thing on her wand-scan after we got back, and she's been giving me advice."

"You should still see one of the mediwitches."

"I know," she said. "I wanted you to know before it became common knowledge. If you like, I'll ask one of them to have a look before the feast tonight."

"And no more patrols or guard duty," he said, and she could already see his jaw setting mutinously.

"Harry, I can still do things, I won't be... incapacitated for awhile yet. I'm not even showing..."

"Of course you can still do things," Harry said in a cheerful tone that did not fool her. "As long as they don't include patrols or guard duty, or other things where you have to leave the cave."

She inhaled a breath to protest, feeling somehow marginalized or shunted to one side – patted on the head and given a lollipop. Thank you, sweetheart, but the adults will handle it. She knew how she felt was ridiculous, even as she felt it anyway, and Harry had read everything on her face before she could verbalize any of it. He put

one finger over her lips to stem the rising protest that seemed a knee-jerk reaction on her part.

"I am not trying to put you in your place, or prevent you from contributing to the Order," he said. "You are perfectly capable of pulling a shift on the lookout, if nothing happened. We can't risk something going wrong, Hermione, you know that. I remember what you told me about Michael, and that is not going to happen to you – or the baby – not if I can do anything in my power to stop it." He eyed her dourly for a moment. "Let's not even talk about the fact that you already knew you were pregnant when you went on that mission." She averted her eyes.

"I know," she admitted weakly, half-sighing. "I know you're right."

"Loads you can do around here," he said, unconsciously echoing Ron. "Don't tell me there aren't at least a dozen experimental spells or charms that you have in the works." He was trying to cheer her up.

"I know," she sighed again. "There is one thing – Fred and I have been working on it over the last couple of days, and it looks quite promising, but – but I ... I was... I was going to be with you until the end, Harry." It was a feeble copy of what she'd said to Ron, but she couldn't help but feel that she was abandoning Harry, that she was betraying something beyond sacrosanct.

"Now, you'll be with me after the end," he murmured, gathering her to him and burying his face in her tangled hair. "You're doing this for us, don't you see? Keeping our baby safe is the best thing you can do for the Order."

Hermione thought that Madam Pomfrey did not look at all surprised when she and Harry trooped into the infirmary some time later.

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter," she said, arching her eyebrows at them with a knowing look on her face. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" Hermione met the mediwitch's gaze squarely. You know why we're here.

“We’re going to have a baby,” Harry said in a sudden, breathless rush, either missing or ignoring the wordless conversation going on between the two women.

“So I was recently made aware, Mr. Potter,” said the mediwitch. “I’m glad you’ve come to see me, Hermione. If you would please take a seat on the bed?”

Wordlessly, Hermione did so, and Harry followed her, standing beside the bed with a distinctly abstracted, this isn’t happening to me expression on his face. The mediwitch performed a wand scan, obviously much more detailed than the basic one Fleur had done, and a readout flowed from her wand tip, as it had when Professor McGonagall had examined Fleur.

“Fourteen weeks tomorrow,” Madam Pomfrey murmured. “The baby’s size is right on track for its age...heartbeat is fine – would you like to hear it?” They both nodded, and the mediwitch flicked her wand in an intricate figure-eight, saying, “Audio.”

Two sounds immediately surrounded them, one a slow, heavy thrum, and the other a faster – almost impossibly fast – higher swish swish swish.

“The slower one is yours, Mrs. Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey. “The other is your baby’s.”

Hermione found herself looking askance at Harry once again, as the tiny, racing sound swirled around them. He was staring into middle distance, dazed, and again, there were the lurking shadows of fear, along with its cousins, worry and despair.

I am not going to be the one that piles on even more pressure and expectations.

Guilt swamped her again, as he seemed to snap out of it, allowing a small smile to play across his face, as though he thought it was expected of him.

“That’s – that’s really amazing,” he mumbled.

“Harry, I’m sorry,” was Hermione’s response.

“I thought I told you not to apologize for this,” he told her. “But how long have you had to adjust to it, to agonize over it? I’ve only just found out, Hermione – and – and the happiness keeps getting drowned underneath the ‘keeping you alive’ part. That doesn’t mean you ever have to doubt how much I love you and my baby.”

Part of Hermione’s heart seized up gratefully at his use of the possessive ‘my’. She had had weeks to grapple with it, and yet somehow expected him to accept it in the span of so many minutes. It was patently unfair, and she was ashamed of herself.

“I don’t doubt it, Harry,” she whispered. “I’ve never doubted it. We’ll – we’ll just take it one day at a time, right? I’ve made it this far...” Her eyes were swimming with tears, and she barely heard Harry’s choked whisper of,

“Yeah...”

“I can tell you the gender, if you like,” Madam Pomfrey inserted gently, compassion and understanding etched delicately into her face.

Hermione sniffed loudly and reached for a tissue from the side table, remembering that they weren’t alone, and the couple exchanged wet, questioning looks.

“Do you want to know now?” Harry asked. Hermione took a moment to think, but then nodded, the fretful and worried part of her wanting to seize every scrap of happiness she could, drain each day dry of joy, so as to not waste a single moment of it, as if there might not be another.

“Yes,” she said more certainly. “I’d like to know now.” The lines of the mediwitch’s face softened into a smile, and Hermione got the feeling that Madam Pomfrey had more than an inkling of the reasoning behind the decision.

“Mrs. Weasley chose not to find out,” she said, as she muttered an incantation and began a new scan. “Although, I’d say that she’s got good odds of having a boy.”

A golden aura floated from the end of her wand, and surrounded Hermione’s abdomen. It shimmered a couple of different colors – deep bronze and then the palest of purples – before fading into nothingness. Harry and Hermione looked expectantly at Madam Pomfrey, unsure what they should have gotten from the wand’s display.

It was evidently as clear as Veritaserum to the mediwitch, since she smiled again and said,

“You’re going to have a daughter.”

The members of the Order who made their home in the cavern beneath the Lake traditionally took turns in the kitchen, making a large amount of food that was kept under warming charms. Meals were catch-as-catch-can, whenever one found a break or came off shift, or felt like eating, and generally were taken at one of the small round tables scattered in the area that had become known as the War Room. One could generally find at least one person eating at the same time, and it was a decent way to get to spend time with everyone in turn.

However, on this day, their first Christmas since the world had changed into something unrecognizable, Remus had melded the small tables together into one long dining table of shining mahogany. Those who weren’t working were busy in the kitchen, or decorating a tree. Faces were somber – though there were flashes of delight every now and again – but most seemed to think that this was something necessary, something positive, something hopeful. A symbol, as Ginny had said of Harry and Hermione’s wedding.

Harry had been working quite diligently in the kitchen with Luna and Mr. Weasley, while, over at the table, Hermione helped transfigure their everyday dishes into fancier holiday fare. Every so often, she could feel his burning gaze on her from across the open floor of the cave, and she would turn to look at him, finding an odd sort of wistful,

wondering look on his face. The worry was never completely absent from his eyes.

The happiness keeps getting drowned...

She thought of the magical conglomeration of spells and potions on which she and Fred had been working, wondering if tonight would be an appropriate moment to disclose it, or if Christmas Eve should be a time devoid of any and all 'shop talk'.

Her hands shook as she pointed her wand at a stack of plates, changing them into dishes gilded with gold and wreathed with holly sprigs. The odious vial of the Circle essence floated into her mind.

If it works, she thought, this could be it...This could be it: the beginning of the end.

And then it would all be up to Harry.

The thought sent trembles of fear throughout her limbs, as she attempted to force herself to face the possibility of losing him, of raising his daughter without him.

There won't be another girl in the entire world prouder of her daddy. Her face became almost ferocious with the thought, and her empty hand strayed almost unconsciously to touch her stomach. I'll make sure of that.

But he's not going to die. I'm not going to let that happen.

She watched detachedly, as Ginny approached the kitchen, her carefully spaced steps barely noticeable as they carried her across a memorized route. She saw the redhead speak to Harry, and Harry's face came alight with a natural smile. He nodded and said something complimentary; Ginny's shoulder lifted in a self-deprecating shrug. He then began Levitating trays down from a cabinet, piling three of them high with food and utensils. Ginny placed Warming charms, and then what looked like some kind of Hovering charm, and she balanced all three trays carefully out to the middle of the cave. Hermione saw her close her eyes and vanish.

It took her only seconds to figure out where Ginny had gone, to take some of the Christmas Eve feast to the guards on duty, which included her oldest brother. A faint, admiring smile crossed Hermione's face.

Do you think Fleur and Ginny just sit round looking dainty all day long? Ron's sardonic, but tender words came back to her suddenly, and she turned back to her transfiguration, feeling more satisfied with herself than she had in quite some time.

The vial of smoky gray vapor drifted into her mind again. It would work, she was almost sure of it.

I may not be on the front lines with Harry anymore, but I'm going to do something to help, Baby, you can rest assured of that.

The food looked both delicious and plentiful, and Hermione, whose unreliable stomach was promising to be amenable, was planning to thoroughly enjoy it. Most of the Order present, save the six in the lookouts, was beginning to drift over and select places around the large table. Ron was at a smaller standard War Room table alone, a plate laden with food already in front of him, but still keeping one weather eye on the Map.

"Before we tuck in," Remus said, clearing his throat purposefully, as the multiple murmured conversations slowly dwindled away. "I'd like to say how honored I am to be spending the holidays with such noble, brave, and honorable people. We've all lost people very dear to us, some more than others." Here his eyes drifted reluctantly to Arthur Weasley, who was sitting next to Ginny near the opposite end. She reached over and clasped his hand, without saying a word. Hermione cast a furtive look at Ron, whose face was pale and sad. "However, I think that, were they here with us tonight, they would heartily approve of our celebration. It is a way to remember what life used to be like, and a way to look forward to when we live that life again. With that in mind, I say to all of you, my family, Happy Christmas." He glanced briefly at each rapt, attentive face, and lifted his glass. "To better days."

Everyone lifted their goblets and echoed Lupin's last words, with Tonks adding a muffled,

"Hear, hear."

There was a kind of shuffling, as people began to reach for trenchers of food, but it was interrupted by the noise of chair legs scraping across stone floor. Hermione looked to her right side to see Harry standing unevenly on his feet. He looked more than a little nervous, with everyone's attention unswervingly fixed on him.

"I – I just wanted to thank everyone who's here, for being here – for not giving up on me, on the fight, no matter how – how black everything looked. I wish I could say I knew that how everything would end, but I don't. It just seems that – that with people like all of you behind me, with us, that failure is not even a possibility." A faint whistle at that; Hermione thought it might have been Ron. "All of you," his eyes tripped to Remus, "have been with me at some of the most pivotal moments in my life." A look at Ron, then Mr. Weasley, McGonagall, and Madam Pomfrey. Lastly, he glanced down at Hermione, with a caressing, lingering look. "So, I'd like you to be present for another one."

It was then that Hermione realized what he intended to do, and she felt the telltale heat creeping up the sides of her face and neck.

"Today, Hermione – my wife – " There were traces of amazed disbelief in those words. "She told me that she – that we were going to have a baby, a girl – in May." There were murmurs of astonishment, punctuated by calls of congratulations. Hermione looked down at her plate, unable to meet anyone's eyes, thought that perverse part of her desperately wished Cho had been there to hear the announcement.

"I wanted you to know because – because you deserve to know, and I – well, if I wasn't determined to win this thing before, I certainly am now." Hermione finally raised her face toward her husband on his last words, to note that he looked solemn and shining, like a knight taking a sacred oath.

You may have saved us all.

Harry raised his goblet, as Remus had, and waited for everyone to raise theirs.

“To victory,” he said. There was more scraping, as everyone stood nearly as one, around the large table, holding the glasses aloft.

“To victory,” everyone echoed. Hermione sipped at her water, certain that there was not a dry eye in the place. She leaned against Harry briefly, and was only mildly surprised when he pressed a brief, but hard and fierce kiss on her lips before all of them.

“To victory,” she whispered back, through a rapidly closing throat.

“And she will be called Victorious,

A phoenix, arising from destruction,

A pathway to a new horizon

She shall be greater than her father,

Even as he surpassed those before him,

Born out of light, into light, at the heart of rebirth,

Illumination in darkness, bringer of

Hope in death,

She will be called Victorious.”

The cavern was so silent that one could have heard a soap bubble burst. People were still frozen, standing, some of them with glasses halfway to lips.

“What the hell...?” came Ron’s uncertain murmur. Hermione snatched up a serviette, transfigured her fork into an inked quill, and began to scrawl feverishly.

"That was a very nice speech, Harry," Luna said amiably. "Are we going to eat while standing? I've heard it's good for digestion, but it would be shame to waste all of Professor Lupin's lovely chairs."

"L – Luna," Harry said hoarsely, having flopped back into his chair as if his legs would no longer support him. "Do you – do you know what you've just said?"

"Of course I do," she said, her voice as bland as always, betraying no wonderment at Harry's odd question. "I asked if we were going to eat standing – "

"Luna, you've just prophesied," Hermione blurted, looking back over the sloppy rendition on her serviette. She read it out loud again, slowly, to an enthralled audience, the Christmas feast absolutely forgotten. Luna's eyes became more than protuberant with mild surprise.

"Well then," she said with some satisfaction. "Aunt Lilith shan't be able to say I've no Seer ability now. My mother had it, you know, though it couldn't have been terribly reliable, or she would have foreseen what happened to her."

"It's bloody nonsense," Ron grumbled. "Be a sight easier for all of us if Seers would just use English and tell it straight out. Bloody poetry." He was clearly trying to defuse the situation.

Hermione looked over at Harry, to see if he shared Ron's view, something she thought possible, as he had once told Ron the prophecy was rot.

He was staring at nothing, his face pinched and tense. She tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow, and felt relief as Seamus asked Luna a question about Seeing, and a low hum of conversation began.

"Another prophecy?" His mouth twisted sardonically. "Another generation where a Potter is shoehorned into a mold, based on – based on – on what? 'Bloody poetry'?" There was anguish in his face, and she knew he was taking on the weight of the world again. "She hasn't even been born yet. She – she – "

“But it’s not like your prophecy,” Hermione interceded, chewing on her lower lip nervously. “Listen to it – it sounds much more optimistic, ‘born out of light, into light’ – that doesn’t sound like a world where Voldemort is in charge. ‘She will be called Victorious’. It – it sounds fairly positive to me.”

“‘Arising from destruction’, ‘hope in death,’” Harry countered. “Whose destruction? Whose death?” He looked at her for one heart wrenching moment. “Yours? Mine? What happens to L – ” He bit off the word and looked very embarrassed. Hermione eyed him suspiciously.

“What happens to who, Harry?”

He dropped his eyes to his lap, and squirmed a bit before replying. Hermione thought it adorable.

“I was – I was thinking that I’d like to give her a flower name. Luna and Mr. Weasley were helping me think of some while we were cooking.”

“What did they suggest?” Hermione asked eagerly, her eyes beginning to sparkle, in spite of the seriousness of what had just occurred.

“They mentioned Rose, Iris, Violet... Luna brought up Bryony – said it was some kind of poisonous vine. Seemed to think that was a positive thing.” He shook his head. “But – but I liked Laurel.” He looked like he was preparing himself for some kind of chastisement, especially once Hermione’s eyes grew wide and she dropped her quill, which turned back into a fork and clattered noisily to her plate. She pressed her hands tightly against her mouth.

“I – I wasn’t trying to decide anything without you. We don’t have to do that – if you don’t like those sorts of names,” Harry was speaking hastily, forestalling what he obviously thought was going to be some kind of major hormonal meltdown.

“Harry, I think Laurel is a lovely name,” she said, talking over his babbling apologies. “It’s just that – that laurel... laurel is best known for being used in ancient Greek games. The winners were crowned as such with wreaths of laurel leaves.”

“And?” Harry prodded, not seeing the connection.

“Laurel crowns symbolize victory,” Hermione’s voice was quiet, almost gentle, as if she were breaking some kind of news to him, and his eyes grew wide with realization.

“‘She will be called Victorious’,” he repeated. Slowly, he lowered his forehead into his hands, and she heard him utter a muffled, “Sweet Merlin.” After a moment, he looked back up at her, and said half-heartedly, “We can call her something else.”

Hermione smiled at him, and shook her head.

“I’ve never put much stock in Divination,” she said unnecessarily. “But I think that’s what she was meant to be called.”

They had been speaking to each other quietly, largely ignored by the other diners, as they were ensconced in their own conversations. But a sudden loud exclamation from Ron, who had been listening to Remus, Tonks, and Seamus, caught their attention.

“You don’t think that makes any difference, do you?” He said, his eyes sliding anxiously away from Harry’s, when the young couple looked up.

Remus looked pensive.

“I honestly don’t know. We have no way of knowing that anyone’s even watching that room, but – but it’s got to be taken into consideration.”

“We could try to get in,” Seamus said off-handedly. “Get it out of there before they even have a chance to notice it exists.”

“We don’t have enough people,” Ron argued. “Nor enough intelligence about the place. There’s no way to tell what we’d walk into.”

“We were there not too long ago,” Tonks said.

“During a rally,” Ron shot back. “Those were hardly normal operating particulars.”

Hermione darted a look at Harry, who seemed to have instantly discerned the thread of the conversation, and was looking more and more worried.

“What are you talking about?” she finally blurted.

“The Hall of Prophecies.” Harry was the one to answer her, sounding quite hoarse. He swung apologetic eyes up to her, and seemed to be, in that one glance, expressing total contrition for ever having met her, loved her, or gotten her pregnant.

It took Hermione only an instant – but that seemed an eternity – to realize the ramifications of the discussion. The warm golden sphere on row 97, with Harry’s name on it, flashed into her memory as though it had been hours ago rather than years.

“So you – you mean there’s one there – a new one, now... about – about our baby,” she said, struggling to keep her voice even. Her arms, apparently of their own accord, were curling slowly around her abdomen, in an unconscious gesture of defensive protection.

Harry closed his eyes, as if trying to recall the details of that long-ago label.

“There were just – just initials, who spoke the prophecy and to whom,” he said, nodding at Luna. “If – since she’s not born yet, it – it can’t give a name. It probably just has a question mark, like mine. I reckon it will fill in after she’s born.”

“Why the concern about it then?” Hermione asked. “If it doesn’t identify Laurel, then what’s to worry about?” The baby name slipped

off her tongue with ease; she marveled at it with a small corner of her mind, as if she'd always known.

"What we don't know is how many initials are on the prophecy," Remus said, "since Luna spoke before an entire table of people. If Voldemort is keeping an eye on any incoming prophecies, it can hardly escape his notice that H.P. is listed as a hearer. It wouldn't take much more to deduce who his companions were, and how many of them there are. It gives too much away about our numbers."

"But they don't know where we are," Hermione pointed out, "and they don't know I'm pregnant. It – it could be talking about anybody."

"Do you know how they're formatted?" Harry asked, directing his question toward Remus and Tonks. "Are question marks used when the person in the prophecy hasn't been born, or just if they're unknown?"

Tonks shook her head helplessly.

"The Department of Mysteries guards its secrets closely," was all she said.

Hermione felt something akin to panic rising in her chest. She had first been ambivalent about her pregnancy, then irritated, then ashamed, and now, when she had just begun to feel the first glows of real happiness and anticipation, a new dread had been tossed into their path like a smoldering land mine. A ferocity accompanied the worry, and she felt sure that had she come across Voldemort himself in that moment, that he would have been no match for her – for any mother struggling to keep her child from the maw of his megalomania.

Harry seemed to sense her rising anxiety, and he reached over and took her hand without looking.

"It's Christmas Eve," he said easily, arresting the attention once again of everyone at the table. "I'm sure we could leave off this discussion until later. It would take awhile to come up with a plan, if one is even necessary. Voldemort knows I'm alive, and he knows that a remnant of the Order yet remains. As long as Laurel's identity – and her

mother's – remains a secret, I'm not sure we have anything to worry about." He hesitated for only a fraction of second, cleared his throat, and spoke again, the timbre of his voice clearly bespeaking a new and lighter subject.

"The best Christmas I ever had was my first year at Hogwarts," he said. "I had to stay at Hogwarts, but I wasn't fussed, as it was a sight better than my aunt and uncle's house. Ron was there," he grinned at his friend. "And I got my dad's invisibility cloak..."

"And one of Mum's sweaters," Ron added, sounding only slightly misty.

"The Christmas after Ginny turned four," Mr. Weasley spoke up suddenly, "sticks out in my mind. She was finally old enough to really understand that something exciting was going on, and was just dying to get her hands on those presents beneath the tree. But Fred and George enchanted the tree to roar at her every time she got within a meter of it... scared her so badly that she had to be coaxed down to the living room Christmas morning."

There was laughter, and Ginny made a strangled noise of negation. He smiled wistfully, but it did reach his eyes, and Ginny leaned over to place her head on her father's shoulder.

"The Christmas before I was bitten," Remus began, and Hermione allowed herself to stop listening, letting the smooth sound of Lupin's voice wash over her, punctuated with laughter and humorous interjections. There were bittersweet pangs every time someone who was no longer present was mentioned, but they kept it deliberately light-hearted, and Hermione was grateful to Harry for initiating it.

She had not forgotten the prophecy, what it might mean, and the danger that could be accompanying it. She had not forgotten the tremendous odds they were facing, and, by the look on Harry's face, even as he laughed at something Seamus said, it had not fully left his mind either.

But it was Christmas, and maybe – for just a little while – as they had tried to do on their wedding night – maybe just on this silent night, they could pretend.

TBC

AN: This is a little shorter than most of its predecessors, but I thought this was a good place to stop. I wanted a little fluffy interlude, and I hope you enjoyed it, even if it waxed a little angsty at the end.

You may leave a review on your way out if you like

lorien

Chapter Twenty-Four: Venture

The New Year seemed to bring renewed purpose to the Order. The lookouts were constantly manned, and there were streams of people coming and going, completing supply lines, covering surveillance, doing reconnaissance work. Defense training had resumed in earnest, with Harry flinging himself with vigor and desperate urgency into his dueling. His magic had improved dramatically, but it still hurt Hermione to see Ron or Seamus regularly best him in training exercises.

He often appeared disheartened and exhausted at the end of a day, but remained quiet about it, rarely commenting on what Hermione was sure he saw as his shortcomings. She would often remark on how his time had improved, or how his Stunning charm seemed to carry more power, but Harry would make a noncommittal noise, his brow furrowed and his eyes distant, as she could see him mentally going over exactly what he'd done wrong and how he could get better, if he could get better.

She had been able to marginally understand, but not really appreciate, what a lonely thing it was to be a people's only hope.

While he did seem to shut her out about his fighting ability, he was overly solicitous of her health and comfort, and that of the baby's. Her figure was blossoming now, and the Enlarging charms cast on her clothing did little now to disguise her condition. Nausea had dwindled to almost nothing, and she felt a renewed energy, as she worked tirelessly with Fred regarding any sort of advantage in spellwork or Potion-craft that they might be able to eke out.

And the vial... always the vial of that horrendous substance that had for so long shadowed Harry's mind swam in the back of her thoughts, tantalizingly. She and Fred had analyzed it, duplicated it, dissected it, boiled it down to its rawest essences. Their efforts, so far, had been unsuccessful, but surely, surely they were close to a breakthrough. Hermione could all but taste it.

Voldemort had not been idle either. Another attack on Diagon Alley had sent even the most intrepid of shopkeepers flying for their lives,

with what little capital they could carry on their person. Knockturn Alley now had now become the chief place of wizard marketing. Prices soared. Fatal hexings occurred with regularity; the government was utterly eradicated, the MLE defunct, though there was some semblance of order maintained through a sort of wizarding Gestapo manned by Death Eaters. Wizards and witches were fleeing England in droves, and with every flight, Hermione knew Harry was thinking, there goes another one that might have helped us. Sometimes, Hermione found herself wishing that they could flee as well, but she knew that eventually Voldemort would bring the fight to Harry, that there would be no resolution, no peace, until one or the other –

...neither can live while the other survives... It had become truer than Hermione would have once thought possible.

Hogsmeade was being rebuilt, property and buildings being given as rewards to those deemed particularly faithful to Voldemort, those who were positively salivating at the chance to live in such close proximity to the Dark Lord himself. The Order worried about this too – it placed a populace sympathetic to the enemy at their backs, should they attempt to take Hogwarts. Harry suspected that the possibility was alive in Voldemort's mind as well, hence the strategic resettlement.

There was much planning going on in the War Room, as the Order tried to work out a plan of action when The Day came. There was a fair amount of certainty that the Death Eaters did not know that they knew about the stationary portkey in the dungeons. But as Remus pointed out,

“One way in is not enough. We've got to have them off their guard. They can't be able to pin us down in one location, and the secret passages to Hogsmeade cannot be considered secure.”

Neville's clone had been scouting, skulking in shadows, and listening in doorways, aided by the Map and an invisibility cloak. He had been sending them regular notes on movements and scuttlebutt about the castle, and was just awaiting their orders to start taking out the clones.

If I can get to some of the Primes, he wrote, I could take out as many as six or seven Clones with the one kill.

Lupin and Tonks had counseled against it for the time being, and Harry had agreed with them. If Neville were discovered, it would take away one of their best tactical advantages.

All in all, the days were a whirlwind of activity, of worry and of plans. Hermione caressed her swelling stomach, with the bittersweet feeling of Laurel somersaulting within her, and felt that they were all hurtling towards zero hour, that the Fates were converging upon one point in time, and that they were all powerless to stop what was coming.

Hermione was unsure as to what exactly awakened her some time in the middle of the night; she just knew that when she opened her eyes and blinked hazily around her, that Harry was already out of bed, one leg in his pants, and there was light and noise beyond their divider.

"What's going on?" she asked, using both arms to push her increasingly cumbersome figure upright.

"Neville's got something," Harry said hastily, not bothering to clarify, but Hermione knew he meant the clone of Neville ensconced up at the castle. "Blaise was watching the Map. He must have yelled or something, because Tonks all but beat down our door."

Hermione nodded briskly, now fully awake and upright, and searching the wardrobe for some clothes. She threw a chagrined look as Harry vanished through the divider; she was going to have to stop in the loo first.

When she joined the larger group, they were milling around the War Room, talking to each other in low, worried murmurs, occasionally darting looks at the Map, as if it might suddenly start spouting profundities or important Dark secrets. Hermione particularly didn't like the way people kept giving her covert looks with wide, concerned eyes. It took her a moment to spot Harry, but then she saw him, actually seated at the table in front of the yellowy parchment, elbows sprawled across it, head in hands. Lupin was behind him, one hand on his shoulder.

Dear Merlin, what now? Hermione wondered, as she threaded her way through the others, until she stood at the table's edge.

"What's going on?" she asked, pressing her lips together, forcing her voice to be steady, though it came out rather more sharply than she would have liked. Harry still wouldn't look at her.

"Hermione," Tonks began tentatively. "Perhaps you'd better sit down..." Hermione felt her eyebrows draw together, anger at Tonks propelled solely by crippling fear.

"Perhaps you'd better tell me what's going on," she repeated, far more stridently than before. To her surprise, she felt hands on her shoulder, pressing her downward into a waiting chair. She looked behind her to see Ron and Fleur, their faces grim.

"You'll want to sit, Hermione, please," Fleur said, whispering liquidly with her French accent. Hermione's knees gave way as she tried to swallow non-existent saliva in a mouth that was suddenly too dry. She wanted to fathom what could be so frightening to her personally, and couldn't grasp it. Harry was here, in front of her; Laurel thumped and rolled safely inside her. Who...?

"Neville has news..." Tonks managed, before her voice gave out, and she had to cough to continue. "There – there's been word round Hogwarts that a – that a new prophecy was catalogued ..."

Hermione literally felt the blood drain from her face, as she looked toward Harry, able to see only his pale fingers threaded through his ebony hair.

"He – he can't know it's – it's her... there – there was nothing..." She stammered, realizing that she was making little sense, and tried to speak coherently. "Voldemort's not mentioned in the prophecy – he has no access to it – he can't know what it said."

Harry finally lifted his head, and she wanted to gasp at his appearance. It was as if he'd aged several years in the last five minutes.

“Voldemort hasn’t lasted this long because he was stupid,” he said in a rough, bitter voice, though she could recognize that the negative emotion wasn’t really directed at her. “He’s got a list of initials and more than enough information to determine to whom they belong. He’s going to see another question mark and automatically assume it involves another baby. Who do you think he’s going to think of first?”

“But he doesn’t know...he doesn’t know anything...not for sure...There’s no way he can know.” Hermione looked at the ring of faces surrounding her, desperately wanting one of them to tell her she was right. One of her hands had instinctively gone to her abdomen.

“No,” Remus said slowly. “He doesn’t know anything yet. But Neville’s overheard talk of an extensive search underway. There are clones combing through every nook and cranny of every wizarding community.”

Hermione’s jaw trembled, and somehow, she managed to form two distinct words.

“For whom?”

“For Sybil Trelawney.”

Hermione wasn’t exactly sure that she could have told anyone what she thought Remus was going to say, but it wasn’t that.

“P – Professor Trelawney?” she echoed stupidly. “But why – why would Voldemort need her? She didn’t make the prophecy.” Her voice trailed off, as she thought of the prophecy concerning Laurel, as she rather irrationally imagined Voldemort’s snake-eyes glowing with malice as he cupped a sphere in his hands.

“She hasn’t made one... yet,” Harry said dully. His eyes looked red-rimmed and bloodshot. Hermione could practically see the thoughts spinning away inside his head. How many more? How many more Potters are to be grist for this mill? How many more children will have their childhood snatched from them while their parents watch helplessly?

Hermione felt as if she were being unconscionably slow.

"I don't understand."

Lupin and Tonks exchanged glances.

"There are – there are certain potions," Tonks began, still speaking in that rather unsure tone, so unlike the practical voice of the Auror, "that when used in conjunction with certain Dark Spells on – used on a Seer of known ability..."

Part of Hermione wanted to shriek with irreverent laughter at the thought of sherry-drenched Trelawney being a Seer of any kind of ability, but there was indisputable evidence of accurate prophetic episodes. Still, she could see the direction in which Tonks was heading.

"They can ... force prophecies?" she asked, in a wondering tone. "Wouldn't those, by their very nature, be inaccurate?"

"Some Seers demonstrate a certain ...affinity for a type of prophecy – it could be prophecies involving a specific type of event, such as war or famine, or they could involve specific individuals or families," Lupin interjected. "So far, Sybil has made two prophecies that refer to Harry and Voldemort. This would make her far more likely to prophesy correctly regarding Laurel and Voldemort. And if she doesn't – or can't – then it's likely the measures will completely break her mind."

Hermione suppressed a shudder.

"Do you think he does know? That Professor Trelawney even made those prophecies?" She heard Ron's voice float out uncertainly, somewhere above her head.

"The face that he's looking for her would seem to suggest as much," Lupin said, and added, as his eyes grew coldly feral, "and there is one in his ranks who does know that she made the first prophecy."

Snape, Hermione thought, and watched Harry's eyes blaze with the same cold hatred seen in Lupin's.

"If – if she doesn't prophesy... if he doesn't find her – then they still won't have enough information to go on, will they?" she persisted. There was the faintest of nudges deep inside her, as if Laurel were reassuring her with her presence. She smoothed her hand over her belly. Oh, sweet baby...she thought.

The air in the War Room grew tense and heavy again with her question.

"That was the other thing Neville informed us about," Tonks replied.

"It's – it's what we talked about at Christmas," Harry rasped. "He – he knows that the subject of the prophecy hasn't been born yet, because the name's not filled in. So...to – to cover all the bases, he's – he's going to – he's planning to give orders to – if they don't find Trelawney..." He lifted his head again to meet her eyes, and such horror welled up from the depths of his gaze that she thought for a fleeting moment that she might be sick.

"He can't – he can't mean an edict against all the babies..." Her voice faltered, as she struggled with the concept, wondering why she found it hard to believe that Voldemort would be as contemptuous of the sweet, fragile innocence of babies as he was of all other life that he deemed less than worthy. "Surely, they – they could be hidden..." But even as she spoke, she knew it was a futile hope.

"The Magical Registry in the Department of Mysteries," Fred spoke up, heavy-voiced. "Enchanted quill automatically takes down the birth records of every child born into a magical family. He'll know the moment she's born – and to which parents."

Hermione clutched at the sides of the chair, feeling her vision blacken around the edges, as she struggled to focus. I will not faint!

"Well, we mucked up right enough by not going after Luna's prophecy when we had the chance," Seamus said, his one good eye grim and

businesslike. "It's fairly clear what we're to do now. We've got to get that Registry."

"You're suggesting we walk right into one of the strongholds of the Dark Lord?" Blaise's tone was derisive.

"Let's watch the Death Eater-speak, shall we, Zabini?" Fred suggested mildly. "I don't see another way. Not only will this keep Harry and Hermione's baby anonymous, but if Voldemort doesn't have a bloody list of all magical babies, then it'll be a sight harder to track them all down, won't it?"

"I'll go," Harry startled everybody by speaking suddenly, and looking around the room almost defiantly. "It's for my daughter, isn't it? And I've been down to the Department of Mysteries. I'll be able to find the Registry."

"Harry, you can't go," Lupin remonstrated, almost gently.

"If I can't – " he took a deep breath, and started over again, angrily, "if you won't let me protect my family, then – "

Ron interrupted him.

"You aren't the only one who's been down there, mate," was his reminder. "Let me go. We'll take a team to the Ministry. After all, Voldemort doesn't know we have an informant inside Hogwarts – if we're lucky, p'raps he won't even be guarding that Registry."

"Neville, Hermione, and Ginny are out, of course," Tonks said, listing the others who'd been there that night. "But I'll go too. Remus should hold down the fort here – and the team doesn't need to be overlarge." She spoke quickly, as if to ward off Lupin's protests before he could make them.

"But what of the prophecy?" Harry demanded suddenly, his voice sounding ragged and worn in the echoing vastness of the cavern. "Once she's born – the prophecy will still disclose her identity."

"You said that your prophecy was relabeled after Voldemort marked you," Hermione corrected him softly. "Not after you were born."

"Because it could have applied to two people," Tonks pointed out. "Most prophetic lore holds that the prophecies are identifiable after the person in question is born."

"Then – then after she's born, her name – her name will – "

"We've got to destroy it," Harry burst out, cutting off her response. "Voldemort does not need to know of Laurel's existence – ever."

"Send in two teams," Seamus suggested, almost lackadaisically. "One to retrieve the Registry, and one to destroy that prophecy."

"It'll be guarded," Ron and Fred blurted in unison, and glanced at each other. A bittersweet shadow crossed Fred's face, and Ron continued, "If Voldemort is already suspicious about the person in the prophecy, then he'll not leave it where it could be taken."

"If there are two teams, they might each distract from the other," Padma suggested. "Surely Death Eaters wouldn't think we'd be brazen enough to try a dual mission."

"It's no good," Harry put in, after shaking his head and muttering to himself. "There was a reason that Voldemort lured me to the Department of Mysteries after the original prophecy. It can only be removed by someone who is mentioned in it."

"So then Voldemort could...?" someone queried, but Hermione was shaking her head before the question could be completed, having committed Luna's prophecy to memory.

"No one is mentioned except Laurel. So how could it be removed at all...?" she trailed off thoughtfully, and then looked up, renewed purpose blazing from her eyes. "I'll have to go. I'll have to go to the Ministry and destroy the prophecy. I'm the only one who can."

Harry stood up so quickly that his chair toppled over backwards. Several people flinched as it clattered noisily to the stone floor. His

eyes were blazing with fury and fear, but his hands trembled as he splayed them across the tabletop to hold himself upright.

“There is no way in hell that you are going into the Ministry,” he said succinctly, his gaze boring into Hermione’s.

“How can I not go?” she retorted. “You know, you know, that if they relabel that prophecy after she’s born, he won’t stop – he won’t stop – until he’s found her and k – killed her.”

“I’m mentioned in it,” he said distinctly, his words dropping heavily into the sudden pervasive quiet.

“No, you’re – ” Hermione began automatically, before the words Luna had spoken at Christmas rang in her mind and stunned her into silence.

She shall be greater than her father,

Even as he surpassed those before him.

“Would I be able to take it?” Harry asked, looking to Tonks, even though she had confessed to her lack of expertise. “If the prophecy is still unlabeled, could I remove it and destroy it?”

“I don’t know, Harry,” the Auror said, apology plain on her face as she shook her head. “It certainly seems possible, but I don’t know if there’s any way to know for certain how an unlabeled prophecy would react.”

“And you’re willing to take that kind of risk?” Hermione’s voice wobbled up and down all the notes of the scale. “Do you remember what happened last time you went charging down there? Has it occurred to you that this might be a similar kind of ploy? Voldemort acts on a supposition, and then just sits back and waits for us to confirm it for him?”

The look Harry shot at her for throwing Sirius’ death in his face was eloquent.

"If you're going, then I'm going with you," she said, in a voice meant to convey that no opposition would be tolerated.

"Like hell you are," Harry retorted coolly, fire flashing in his eyes. She felt heat rise into her face.

"You don't even know if it will work. The prophecy might not let you take it. If you can't, I'd be good back-up. I am her mother," she pointed out, half-amazed at how matter of fact she sounded.

"If I can't get at it, then at least we'll know that no one else can either," Harry said, undeterred. "You are not going."

"And what happens if you're captured?" Anger and fear trembled in her voice, and her eyes filled with tears. "What will the rest of us do then?"

Harry's head sank between his shoulders as his gaze dropped to the Map, and it was only with effort that he lifted it again.

"Please don't do this," he asked, and it sent a pang straight through Hermione's heart. He was speaking to her as if they were the only people in the room. "Making me choose between them and her... and you. Don't. Please." Somehow, Hermione could tell it was costing him much to say that, to bare his soul in front of all of them, to nakedly and vulnerably reveal his fear of that from which he might never recover.

"It's too dangerous and you're too important," Hermione pressed on, ignoring the pleading on his face. "I should be the one to go."

"If you – if you – " he began, but couldn't finish. He thrust both hands through his hair and swore in utter frustration, finally turning and striding back to their bedroom. Everyone watched in uncomfortable silence as he passed through the dividers, which subsequently darkened.

Hermione felt worn and empty, as if all the energy had been suddenly drained from her body, as if he had taken it with him when he stalked out.

“Am I making a mistake?” she wondered, to nobody in particular.

“It’s not an ideal situation,” Tonks admitted. “I wish we knew more about the Hall of Prophecies... it would help if we could at least be sure that one of you would even be allowed to handle the sphere.”

“If we can get the Registry and destroy the prophecy, then Voldemort will have no way to find out who the baby is,” Seamus said, ticking the points off on his fingers. “It doesn’t mean that he won’t suspect the obvious, but I don’t see how we can do anything less.”

“I reckon Tonks could impersonate a Death Eater, like she did at the rally,” Ron suggested. Tonks looked thoughtful for a moment, but shook her head.

“I could, but I still don’t have the clearances or passwords that we’d need to move around in the Ministry without arousing any suspicion on the part of the Death Eaters. What we really need is the knowledge of an insider willing to help us.”

Fred snorted. “I’m sure there are just loads of people like that lounging about Knockturn Alley.”

Blaise cleared his throat noisily, drawing the attention of everyone gathered.

“I – I might know of someone...” he began hesitantly, quite unlike his usual air of confidence and near unconcern.

“Who?” Ron’s gaze had narrowed with suspicion.

“Daphne Greengrass,” he said, nodding to his former schoolmates, “you know her. She – she was more like me...never nearly as militant as some of the other – the others in Slytherin. She works in the Ministry, and I think – ”

“How do you know she’s still there?” Padma interrupted. Blaise shifted his weight from foot to foot for a moment, finally lifting his chin to meet everyone’s gaze almost defiantly.

“Because I’ve been in contact with her.”

There was a sudden uproar, shouts of protest and noisy clamor as furniture was knocked aside. The Weasleys had made a synchronous lunge for Zabini, but were diverted by Seamus.

“I knew it,” Ron was saying. “I knew it. You just can’t trust Slytherins! Slimy double-crossers, the lot of them.”

Seamus was standing between them, his arms outstretched in a defensive entreaty, but he was looking at Blaise, as if begging for some kind of explanation.

“Why would you do such a thing?” Remus asked. His voice was bland, as if he were once again posing a hypothetical situation in front of a classroom, but his eyes flickered dangerously.

“I haven’t told her anything,” Blaise insisted. “I ran into her one day while we were out. I was under Glamour, but she still figured out it was me. She always was a sharp one. We’ve kept in contact...I was feeling her out, trying to see if she might be sympathetic.” At the continued skeptical looks from the others, he added, “She knows about my fall from grace. If she truly wanted to curry favor with the Death Eaters, then why hasn’t she turned me in?”

“Maybe because she’s waiting for you to lead her to bigger fish,” Ron spat. Blaise quirked a sardonic eyebrow at him.

“What, like you, Weasley?”

Ron was no longer trying to get past Seamus, but his glares at the Slytherin were positively murderous.

“Just let me talk to her, one more time. I’ll explain my loyalties, and see where she stands. If she – if she isn’t who I think she is, then – then I’ll be the only one at risk,” Blaise said, sounding brisk and businesslike.

“Unless they torture you into giving up our location,” Fred pointed out, almost lackadaisically. Blaise fixed him with a grim, determined expression.

“Trust me, I won’t allow that to happen.”

“Harry?” Ron poked his head through the divider, and squinted into the dimmed lights of the room. “Head still up your arse then?”

“Sod off, Weasley,” came a threateningly growled response from the shadowy figure hunched at the edge of the bed. Hermione paused at the threshold at the snarled response, feeling at once grateful that she had sent Ron in as an intermediary and ashamed of her cowardice.

Ron could not be so easily deterred, and he called for lights, moving to sit on the trunk at the foot of the bed.

“She’s doing the right thing, you know,” he remarked, almost casually.

“It’s too big a risk. For her and the baby. If I ...” Harry’s voice was muffled, fingers steeped in front of his face, as if even the vocalization of the possibility were too much for him to contemplate.

“She’s trying to save your baby. And who knows how many other babies?”

“Taking the Registry will save the other babies,” Harry said hotly, whipping his head around to finally glare at Ron. “Let somebody else do that. She doesn’t have to go. Not Hermione.” He inhaled a shuddering, ragged breath, and finally said it. “Do you – do you know what it will do to me, if I lose her? If I lose them?”

“I’ve an inkling,” Ron said dryly, causing Harry to fix him with a curious glance and then smile half-heartedly. They lapsed into a momentary silence, before Ron spoke again. “Look, Harry, if – if anyone had told me a year ago that we’d be – we’d be bloody well hiding in a cave, plotting how to do Voldemort in or die in a blaze of glory trying, that – that most of my... family ...” his voice wobbled a little on the word, “would be dead, I – I would have said they were

crazy... and – yet, here we are. And we're all actually still functioning – doing something, you know?

“Hermione – her whole life practically since we first got to Hogwarts has been helping you, standing by your side. She was so scared to tell you she was pregnant, because she thought that meant she would be forced away from you, unable to help you any longer – and that you – you would – I dunno, resent her or something because she wasn't there.”

“That's ridiculous,” Harry snorted derisively. “She has a bloody good reason for being out of the line of fire. I like knowing that she is safe, that my baby is safe.”

“Don't you think she wants you safe as well, then?” Ron demanded, a sort of triumph in his tone, as one playing his trump card. “As endangered as any of us are just for standing against Voldemort, how much more is that multiplied when it comes to you? You know, when he – when he took you, we – we all thought it was over, thought you were dead, that there was nothing that could be done. And Hermione just – just bloody well thumbed her nose at the entire Order and went marching into Voldemort's bloody house and got you out. You think you have the corner on being the most broken up if something happens?”

“Hermione's strong,” Harry said in a rough voice. “Besides, if my dying rids the world of Voldemort, then it's – it's for the greater good.”

“Tell that to your widow and your fatherless child,” Ron said bluntly. Harry made a kind of strangled noise in the back of his throat. “What happens if you save the world, but then her world is gone?”

“Are you trying to make me feel worse, Ron?”

“I'm trying to tell you that she is just as scared of losing you as you are of losing her,” the redhead said slowly. “She is one of the only two people who has a chance of dashing that prophecy against the nearest convenient brick wall. And you need to stop feeling sorry for yourself, and remember that you're in this together, and then get down on your knees and tell her you understand why she wants to do

it, and thank her for loving you – and ...” Ron seemed to suddenly realize that he had said too much, and stopped abruptly, his ears glowing like twin beacons.

The silence grew so heavy that Hermione risked poking her head farther around the edge of the divider to see what was going on.

Harry was staring at Ron as if he'd never seen him before.

“I don't reckon,” he finally said, the words dragging from his mouth, as if under heavy weights, “that I ever really understood what you've gone through since that battle at Hogwarts.”

“I'll look after her with my life, Harry,” Ron said seriously. “You know that. I swear on my – ” he stopped again, and Hermione wondered if he was thinking of the skulls that decorated the stage at Voldemort's rally, wondering which of them belonged to his brothers, his mum...

“I know you will,” Harry said, sighing despondently. “I just wish I could do something.”

Ron stood to his feet then, and moved toward the door, but looked back over his shoulder at his best mate.

“You're still here,” he pointed out. “And your magic's coming back. You're doing more than you know, trust me. And you'll have more than your share to do before it's all over.”

After Ron passed her, Hermione waited for what seemed like forever before finally gathering up the courage to enter the room she and Harry shared. When she did, she saw that he was still sitting on the edge of the bed, in much the same position that she'd seen him during his conversation with Ron.

He lifted his head to look at her when she entered, but said nothing. She swallowed.

“Are you okay?”

“My pregnant wife wants to waltz right into the mouth of the dragon,” he said, after a moment. “No, I’m not okay.”

“Harry, I – ”

“I understand all your reasons, and they seem to be good ones. But I don’t like it. And you can’t expect me to.”

“Nobody is expecting you to like it,” she offered softly, darting her eyes up at him, as she moved to the trunk at the foot of the bed, rifling through its contents and adding some of them to her pack, which she then set on the wooden chair in the corner. “I don’t like it...but I think it needs to be done.” The springs of the bed creaked quietly, as she sat down beside him, and regarded him wordlessly, tucking a curly strand of hair behind one ear and waiting on him to say something.

The artificial lighting in the cavern began to dim slightly, and Harry shot Hermione a questioning look.

“Blaise is going to try to reach Daphne Greengrass for help in accessing the Ministry. He believes that she can be trusted. We can’t do anything until he’s spoken with her, so we’re to try to get what sleep we can before we head out.”

Harry’s face tightened back up at her use of the phrase ‘head out’, and she noticed. Her lips compressed together in sympathy and worry.

“Harry...” she sighed an apology.

He leaned toward her, propped on one hand, and used the other hand to run his fingers through her wild hair.

“You – you encompass the two most important things in the world to me,” he said, his voice barely audible. “The thought of you going in there terrifies me.” He pressed his forehead to hers, dropping a soft kiss on her lips. His anger seemed to be gone, squelched and suffocated by the overwhelming fear that came from his overwhelming love. “I love you so much.” Another kiss, this one

deeper. Hermione felt herself arching toward him, even as he was already speaking again. "Promise me you'll be careful. Promise me you'll come back."

She wanted to protest the futility of such a promise, but the look in his eyes told her that he was well aware of that fact.

"I promise," she whispered, even though they both knew it was a vow impossible to keep. His lips moved on to her jawline, the barest tips of his fingers slowly sliding her hair out of the way, moving it from where it impeded his progress down her neck.

"Harry..." she said again, but this time it was a bleat of protest, its very nature belied by the vibrato of desire that thrummed through the pair of syllables.

"No one's going anywhere until morning," he said plaintively, nudging aside the neckline of her shirt.

"We're supposed to rest," she informed him, even as she tilted her head to one side, to offer him more skin.

He hummed his affirmative response into the sensitive flesh beneath her ear, and his fingers strayed to the hem of his shirt, where they deftly unfastened one button, then two, then three.

"But maybe..." Hermione suggested, trying not to sound breathless. "Maybe relaxing would be just as good."

And the thought that rang through her head, resounding over and over again in a prayer of supplication to an unseen Power, as the heat from their bodies commingled, and she gave herself over to the feel of his mouth on her, was, this isn't the last time, this won't be the last, it won't be the last, I won't let it be the last...

It was the ever so slight increase in bustle and conversation beyond the boundary of their divider that roused Hermione from her fitful slumber. She pushed her tumbled hair back from her face, and sat up, even as her body decried the withdrawal from Harry's comforting warmth. He stirred as she slid from the bed, and reached toward the bedside table for his glasses without looking.

“There’s no need for you to get up...” she began, as an almost token protest.

“I’m getting up,” he said in a decisive tone, cutting her off before she finished her sentence. Figuring that his mood was going to be less than amiable, despite the interlude they had both enjoyed, Hermione did not offer further argument.

Instead, she occupied herself with donning fresh robes, double-checking her pack, shrinking it, and secreting it beneath her clothing. She then turned toward the mirror and eyed herself critically within it. Almost mechanically, she began to cast several Glamours upon herself, straightening and shortening her hair, changing her eye color and skin tone, and lastly, casting a spell that hid her pregnancy from sight. She watched her wand-slender figure in the glass, and moved her hands toward her waist, where they were stopped several inches from her visible body by an invisible – but still present – abdomen.

“It’s like a Masking charm, see?” She said, meeting Harry’s eyes in the mirror. He approached her from behind, leaning his chin over her shoulder and overlapping her hands with his, resting on what appeared to be nothing.

“My turn...” he said, with a falsely casual air that did not fool her in the slightest. She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously, and asked, with a decidedly cool tone,

“Your turn for what?”

“For the Glamour charms? You always were a sight handier at them than I was – I can’t imagine I’ve improved lately.”

She turned to face him then, and forced her lips into a sweetly dangerous, artificial smile.

“Why on earth would you need any Glamour charms cast on you?” His green eyes had darkened with determination, and his gaze did not waver from hers.

“Because I’m going with you.”

She blew air out from between her lips with impatience, even as the last three words were still proceeding from his mouth.

“Now is not the time for this, Harry.”

“The time for ‘this’? The time for what? Do you think I’m being difficult to make some kind of point?” His voice whip-cracked around the room, angry and sarcastic.

She whirled away from him, refusing to meet his eyes any longer, and gave herself another once-over in the mirror, checking the security of her pack one last time, and tucking her wand safely away in her robes.

“It doesn’t matter what I think.” She was impatient, dismissive. How dare he try to pick a fight with her now? “They’re not going to let you go.”

He reached out and snagged her upper arm, pulling her toward him almost roughly. His face was centimeters from hers, and there was barely a trace of the loving tenderness that she had found there only hours before. Instead, the lines of his body were brittle and his eyes like shards of green-black volcanic glass.

“I’m asking you to stand with me in this. I need to do this.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he plunged ahead, washing away her response with the torrent of words and emotion that followed. “Laurel is a part of me and of you. She’s ours. And if there’s any possibility that I could be the one needed to safeguard her life, her destiny... then I’m willing to take that risk. I’ve given up everything, everything, for the almighty bloody Fight, but I’m not going to hide in this bloody cave while you go in there alone. I won’t do it, Hermione.” His grip was biting into the flesh of her arms, and she hadn’t even noticed, but he did, and relaxed his hold on her. “They won’t stand against the both of us.”

“Do you really understand what you’re asking me to do?” She breathed in a voice that was far more wobbly than she would have liked. “If something happens to you...”

“I need to do this... I need to know that I can do this. Hermione, please.”

She regarded him silently for a long moment, blinking rapidly a number of times in an effort to stay the stinging tears that threatened to overspill their boundaries. Releasing only the slightest of shuddering sighs, she retrieved her wand from its inner pocket, and cast several spells on him in quick succession.

When she was done, he was swarthy in complexion with dark hair and even darker eyes, but something of Harry still seemed discernible in his face. She felt a sudden stab of fear, as Blaise Zabini’s words came back to her mind. I was under Glamour, but she still figured out it was me. She always was a sharp one. Would a particularly alert Death Eater still be able to tell it was Harry? Lucius Malfoy had known Harry’s wand on sight that day during the battle at Hogwarts. She rolled her wand nervously between the tips of her fingers. If something goes wrong, it will be all your fault, she told herself sternly.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked, the corners of his eyes crinkling anxiously, as she cast a couple of layers of Imperturbable charms over their Glammers, so that it would take more than just Finite to expose them for their true selves.

If they catch you, I’ll be responsible for your death and the utter annihilation of the wizarding world as we know it. So many people hate you, hate what you stand for, would rejoice in your death – is there any spell strong enough to truly hide who you are?

She said only,

“Lucius Malfoy recognized your wand when you were Polyjuiced during the battle at Hogwarts.”

"You can't fundamentally alter the appearance of a wand. Illusion spells won't work on them," Harry pointed out, obviously. She was already nodding.

"We'll have to try a Confundus charm," she said. "Hopefully, that will bewilder anyone who takes it into his or her head to examine your wand very closely." She hoped that her voice exuded more confidence than she actually felt, as she cast the charm in question. "Roll up your sleeve," she said, perfunctorily, and he obeyed without question, watching curiously as she inked Dark Marks onto both of their forearms. As almost an afterthought, she traced his magical signature in the air, and revamped the Masking charm that she had cast that long ago autumn day in the Scottish hut.

Satisfied that they were ready to go, she laced her fingers tightly through his, as they moved toward the divider.

"Harry Potter," she whispered fiercely, leaning over to kiss him desperately on the mouth. "You had better not give me cause to regret this." His eyes raked over her face solemnly, as if he were stamping each of her features indelibly on his memory. He whispered only,

"I love you."

Hermione felt the weight of the curious and dismayed eyes when both of them stepped into the cavern proper. Harry squeezed her hand in support, but she couldn't bring herself to even look at either Lupin or Ron. Instead, she lifted her chin with an air of confidence, and smiled unseeingly.

"We're ready," she called out, and they moved toward the staging area at the edge of the Lake.

Blaise was in mid-sentence when they arrived, and his eyes trailed over them lingeringly and curiously, but he did not falter in his speech.

"...Daphne's agreed to meet us in the subterranean levels beneath the Ministry. With Arthur's directions," here he nodded toward Mr. Weasley, "we should be able to gain access through the same

ductwork that he used to exit. If Tonks can get us through the wards, then Daphne should be able to ensure that the breach isn't noticed."

"And how about getting through the populated parts of the Ministry?" Hermione asked, still holding tightly to Harry's hand and striving to force her voice to sound natural.

"Daphne works in the Department of Mysteries. She says that the Department is intently watched, but still remains more open than many others because the work done there is so highly specialized and misunderstood that the Death Eaters are forced to tolerate employees that may be neutral or at least less than fanatically loyal. Anyway, there are so-called 'Inspectors' who snoop around down there on a regular basis – evidently it's the Dark Lord's way of keeping apprised of any potential 'situations' that might crop up. Daphne thinks that we can pose as these inspectors, and have relatively unrestricted access. She's going to try to obtain one of their identification cards that we can duplicate and alter for our purposes."

Ron, sporting longish sandy hair tied back in a queue, had arrived somewhere in the middle of the briefing, and said rather sullenly,

"What exactly does Greengrass know? How do we know that we won't be faced with a squadron of Death Eaters the second we set foot inside the Ministry?"

Blaise sighed in a long-suffering way.

"Well, Weasley, I suppose that you can't know for sure, now can you? But the fact remains – whether you like it or not, as it happens – that I am on your side, and I believe that Daphne can be trusted. She could have turned me in three or four times over by now, if she'd wanted." Ron scowled, crossing his arms defiantly, and glaring at Zabini, undeterred.

"You didn't answer my first question."

"I'm not an imbecile, Weasley. I told her that we were fighting for the Order, and that we needed to ... appropriate the Magical Birth Registry. She doesn't like the idea of anyone taking out children any

more than we do. I mentioned nothing about the prophecy, and figured she didn't need to know that she would be escorting members of the illustrious and most wanted Golden Trio." The label left his lips with ill-concealed sarcasm. "And seeing as how, apparently, nobody knew that Potter was going to try to play the hero, I couldn't have told her about him either, could I?" Harry made no overt movement at Blaise's derisive comment, but Hermione felt the muscles in his arm tense, and she quietly laid one hand over them in subtle restraint.

"Harry..." Remus interjected quickly, seeing his moment at Blaise's mention.

"You can't talk me out of this, Remus," Harry said respectfully, even though he had raised his other hand with the unintentional, but unmistakable, aura of command. "Hermione's going, and I'm going with her. She's taken every precaution. I understand my – my value," he looked as if he wanted to gag on the word, "but I am going to take every action available to me to preserve my daughter's life. I've been hiding long enough."

Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder, and she tossed a glance behind her to see that Ron had stepped into place there.

"I'll see that they both return safely, Professor Lupin," he said in a voice of steely determination that Hermione had heard only rarely. She smiled gratefully at him, while their former D.A.D.A. professor looked as if he would still like to protest.

Tonks hastily stepped into the gap.

"We should go then. The more quickly we get there, the less likely that Voldemort has already put safeguards in place to secure the Registry." She pushed her sleeve up over her elbow, and extended her arm to Hermione. "If you wouldn't mind doing the honors."

Hermione released Harry's hand and reached for her wand, deftly performing the spell that would create the facsimile of the Dark Mark on the arms of the other team members. She looked up at Harry and Ron, looking so unlike the two she loved so well, and felt another ripple of unease. She desperately hoped that it was not a portent.

When they finally arrived in the dank basement rooms of the Ministry, Hermione had never been so glad to be able to stand upright in her life. The space was damp and desolate, smelling strongly of mildew, but at least she wasn't crouched over on her hands and knees. She pressed her hands to the small of her back, which was aching assiduously. She felt Harry's concerned presence hovering at her elbow.

"Are you all right?" It was a low murmur in her ear.

"I'm fine," she said, in what she hoped was a reassuring tone. "I just didn't realize that the – the pregnancy might look invisible, but it doesn't feel invisible. I certainly hope we're not going to be crawling through any more vents."

Whatever Harry might have replied was cut off by a furtive whisper and the sudden flare of blue-white wandglow.

"Zabini?" came a nervous-sounding voice. "Blaise, is that you?"

"We're over here, Daphne," Blaise replied, lighting his own wand so the dank shadows were chased away even more completely. A backlit figure in billowing robes moved toward them. Hermione noticed surreptitious motion as Ron, Harry, and Tonks all reached for their wands. Without even realizing she'd moved, she felt her fingers close about the shaft of her wand as well.

Daphne appeared smaller than Hermione remembered, frail and almost nondescript. She was never nearly as militant as some of the others.

Blaise stepped beyond her, as she drew into the light, and raised his wand high, clearly inspecting the corridor through which she'd just come. Hermione thought she saw a somewhat hurt look flicker over Daphne's face. Apparently, Blaise had noticed it as well, when he turned back toward the group.

"Sorry, Daphne. Can't be too careful, you know. Have you got the badge?"

She reached into a pocket and proffered a small plastic card, with a moving photograph in the lower right hand corner. Blaise took it from her, and scrutinized it closely, squinting against the glare of the Lumos charm.

“There are anti-Duplication wards on the originals, but I managed to remove them while the Inspector had his head stuck in a bell-jar.” She laughed slightly, but it came off as nervous and false in the echoing, empty hallway. “Since this is a copy, you should be able to alter them as you see fit.”

Blaise made additional copies of the identification card, and passed them out to everyone else. As they were making their adjustments, he nodded toward the duct opening that had served as their access point to the Ministry.

“Can you check the ward breach?”

Daphne moved to the duct, and cast a couple of diagnostic spells at the black maw of the opening.

“Looks pretty clean,” she said, looking with grudging admiration toward the other team members, all Glamoured except for Metamorphed Tonks. She cast another spell which caused the rift made by Tonks to shimmer purple, close, and disappear. “They shouldn’t notice a thing. One of you must have been an Auror.”

Nobody responded, and Daphne filled the silence by pulling a handful of small objects from a pocket in her robes, and tossing each one of them one in turn. Hermione turned the small ring over in her hand curiously, and looked questioningly at her former classmate.

“What do these do?” she finally asked.

“Calibrate them with your identification. It will cause the wand-scan at the Reception desk to give a false reading of your wand, and match it with the identity on your card.”

Blaise whistled admiringly, as he slid the thin metal ring onto his wand.

“What they won’t think of next,” he muttered under his breath. Hermione saw Tonks scan hers covertly, before attaching it to her wand. A tense and distrustful silence filled the abandoned corridor. Finally, Daphne jerked her head back in the direction from which she’d come.

“Well,” she spoke slowly and with hesitation. “We should go.”

Hermione was sure that someone would be able to detect their treasonous mission by her increased heart rate alone. They walked through the large atrium, steps clipping on the floor in a businesslike way, as she struggled not to reach out and physically draw strength from her husband. As they neared the Reception desk, the number of black-robed, dour-faced witches and wizards increased, but she grew only slightly more comfortable in their anonymity.

She had felt the tension from both Ron and Tonks when they’d entered the large entry hall, and knew that it stemmed from their presence at the rally. The greenish glow was still present in the rather eerie lighting, but the Ministry was much more like an office with the brisk and constant flow of people, than with a slaving mob packed within it. She took a moment to feel glad once again that Harry had not been present that day, and Ron’s gaze met hers as though he’d read her mind. She tilted one corner of her mouth upward at him in understanding, and then they were at the counter.

“Wands, please,” said a bored-sounding witch, in black like everyone else, and with talon-like nails to match. Hermione was trying to appear as blasé as possible, as her wand clattered into the proffered tray with everyone else’s, but she was afraid that the anxious and guilty heat was rising obviously in her face. She noted the edge of the Dark Mark peeking out from under the witch’s sleeve, as she withdrew the tray of wands for scanning.

There was a brief moment where the Confundus charm on Harry’s wand seemed to cause some sort of glitch in the scan, and the witch swore healthily under her breath, but the occurrence passed.

Hermione felt the knot in her stomach ease when their wands were returned, accompanied by small badges with their fake names and “Department of Mysteries Inspection” printed neatly beneath.

“Have a nice day,” the witch droned, sounding like she couldn’t have meant anything less, and Hermione couldn’t help but marvel that polite social inanities were still in place, even in a world of Darkness.

“Right this way, please,” Daphne said, using a tone of impersonal formality for the benefit of the Reception witch, as she gestured them toward a corridor that they knew all too well.

A few more bends and twists of the meandering hallway, and Hermione felt herself relax further. They were seeing fewer and fewer Ministry employees, and those they had seen had not even given them more than the most cursory of looks. All they had to do now was get the prophecy and the Registry, and use their medallions to get the hell out of there. She flicked surreptitious eyes toward Harry and Ron, and knew that they were thinking the same thing she was.

Daphne, on the other hand, seemed to grow more flustered and nervous, her steps carrying her faster down the corridor. They had to noticeably increase their pace, until Blaise finally lunged forward and caught her by the elbow.

“Hey,” he said in a concerned and sympathetic voice. “Are you okay?”

She smiled unevenly at him, and deliberately slowed her stride, tucking a wayward strand of hair behind an ear in a gesture that seemed nervously habitual.

“I’m sorry. I just – this is all – it’s a little nerve-wracking for me.”

Blaise nodded and touched her arm gently, a movement meant to quietly reassure.

“You’re doing the right thing,” he murmured, so softly that Hermione barely heard him.

And then they were standing at the door that Mr. Weasley had been guarding when Nagini had attacked him. Hermione felt Harry go rigid beside her, even when Daphne led them into the circular room of rotating doors, she could only muster up vague detachment. It all seemed like a lifetime ago, and so many people had died since then...

The doors began to spin at a dizzying pace until Daphne stopped them with a sharply barked spell and password. Ron let out a softly barked chuckle of laughter.

"That'd have been nice to know last time, eh, mate?" he said in a low whisper, elbowing Harry in the side. Harry didn't respond, his face looking pale and strained, and he'd lifted one hand to absent-mindedly rub at where his scar should have been. Hermione hissed a little between her teeth, a warning for him to mind what he was doing, and his hand arrested mid-motion. A covert glance at Daphne revealed that she was moving toward a door, reaching for a specific knob, and had not appeared to notice any of the byplay.

Still, as they entered the door that she indicated, Hermione felt the knot of unease, which had untied itself slightly after they left the Atrium, return.

At a junction of two intersecting corridors, Daphne stopped and turned to face them.

"The Registry is housed in that room, third one, left hand side," she said. "You have a way to get back out?" Blaise reached up to his shirt collar, where his medallion was concealed, and nodded. "Good, then – then I'm through here... I – I have to get back to work."

"Daphne," Blaise called out as quietly as he could. "you – you know you don't have to stay here..."

She turned back toward him, and smiled a little, but it was twisted and mirthless. She looked almost apologetic.

"I'm sorry, Blaise," she whispered. "I'm – I'm not cut out for this... I'm not like you – and I – I certainly wasn't ever in Gryffindor." Had her

eyes flickered in their direction, Hermione wondered? "I wouldn't – I wouldn't know where to go or... " She shook her head quickly, dislodging the hair that she'd tucked away earlier. "I'm sorry," she concluded abruptly. "Good luck."

Her heels clacked back down the hallway, as the group knotted together briefly.

"All right, you and Tonks go get that Registry," Harry was saying to Blaise. "We'll go to the Hall of Prophecies. If I remember correctly, it's just through there. Once you've got the Registry, go back. Don't wait for us."

Hermione turned suddenly, her short hair swishing around her chin, as she heard a shuffling noise, but concluded that it was just Daphne's heels skidding as she rounded the corner. Her footfalls soon faded out of earshot.

"Remus will kill me if I come back without you," Tonks pointed out. Harry seemed to consider debating this, but evidently decided that a corridor controlled by the enemy was not the place for it.

"Then watch for us from the doorway," he said. "Stay out of sight."

The group split apart, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione moved in a path identical to the one they'd traversed in fifth year. All was not unchanged though, and Hermione reflected that the research Voldemort would be interested in was probably quite different from what the former administration had espoused. The room where the brains had been – Ron was visibly suppressing a gag reflex – was now lit in a lurid red and lined with some kind of magical restraining devices. Some were empty, and some were holding people. Dark-robed Unspeakables moved briskly among them, and Hermione heard muffled cries of pain.

When one worker looked at them curiously, Harry held up his badge.

"Inspection. Continue about your business, please," he said briskly.

The room with the veil was as empty as it had been the first time they'd entered it, with the arch still free-standing in its center. But now, instead of fluttering softly, the veil billowed and snapped, as though propelled by a gale-force wind. And instead of barely audible whispers, there were high-pitched keens of soul-rending anguish that seemed calculated to shred the eardrum and pierce the heart. Hermione could hear them, and knew by the looks on their faces, that Harry and Ron could too.

"Is that what it sounded like before?" Ron asked, seemingly barely resisting the urge to flatten his palms over his ears. Harry's face was grim.

"No."

They gave the arch a wide berth, and exited the room quickly.

Once in the Hall of Prophecies, they began moving quickly down the aisle, wands out, heading the same direction that they had before, but passing the aisle that had housed Harry's prophecy without a second glance. Though it remained unspoken, they were all acting on the assumption that the spheres were filed in chronological order.

Now we just have to find the end...Hermione mused, as they passed aisles 104 and 105.

"There!" she hissed suddenly, pointing down aisle 106, which still contained empty shelving. She took a step down the aisle, but stopped suddenly at the feel of Harry's hand gripping her arm. She looked at him questioningly, and he shook his head, exchanging glances with Ron. Their best friend moved down the adjacent aisle, slowly, and Hermione understood. Ron was going to make sure the far end was clear, before they exposed themselves and the prophecy they were after.

They stood there for what felt like eons, Hermione's hand still distractedly fisted in Harry's sleeve, before Ron poked his disheveled, sandy head around the opposite end of the aisle.

“Clear,” they both heard him call as softly as possible. Only then, did Harry nod at her, as they both began to move down the aisle, scanning the labels as rapidly as they could. Ron continued a circuit around the nearest aisles, keeping watch while they searched.

It was Harry who saw it first, the shining golden sphere with the crowded label, a question mark front and center, Luna’s initials, and then a whole host of letters parading as initials of those who had heard it. H.P. led the way.

“I can’t believe it wasn’t guarded,” Harry murmured, reaching for it, but tiny bolts of lightning seemed to arc from the surface of the sphere to his hand. He swore and jerked his hand back, wringing his wrist joint to shake out the sting, and exchanged a rueful glance with Hermione.

“Shall I try?” she asked, not really wanting to sound like I told you so, but unable to fully refrain.

“By all means,” he said theatrically, gesturing toward the prophecy. She was confident in her identity as Laurel’s mother, and so was completely flummoxed, when she was prevented from removing the prophecy as well.

“I guess if neither of us can get it, then that means nobody can,” Harry pointed out, obvious disappointment at their failure in his tone. He turned as if to vacate the aisle, but she grabbed at his robe, and said,

“Wait! Let’s try it together.”

In slow motion, they reached for the sphere again, moving deliberately so that their fingertips would touch the sphere at the exact same moment. Hermione found herself bracing for another jolt of pain, but none came. Instead, she felt only smooth, warm glass beneath her hand.

“It worked!” Harry breathed, almost in awe, as they carefully lifted it down. Golden light spilled over both of them and split into diamond

sparkles that splashed onto the floor. Harry was looking around for Ron, when Hermione gasped suddenly.

“Harry, look!” She stared at the label as one transfixed. The question mark was swirling on the label reforming itself into script that was faint at first, but quickly darkened.

The label now read, Laurel Potter

They exchanged bewildered glances again, and Hermione tried to fathom what it all meant, placing it in context of Dumbledore’s conversation with Harry about the innate natures of prophecies in general, and whether or not they tended to be self-fulfilling. Would it have always been Laurel’s prophecy? Or had they made it so by retrieving it together?

“Well, there’s no doubt that we’ve got to smash it now – ” Harry began, but was cut off by a unseen and muffled yell, followed by the sound of shattering glass. “Oh shit.” A glowing line of spell fire passed by the end of the aisle, and ended in more breaking glass.

“Ron?” Hermione’s voice was quiet and unsure, as she directed the question toward Harry. There was another cry, this one of pain and protest, and it sounded as if a body had hit the rack of shelves just on the other side, for the shelves they faced wobbled precariously. More glass spheres hit the tiled floor.

Quickly, Harry grabbed Hermione’s hand and relinquished their mutual grip on their daughter’s prophecy. As it hit the ground, Harry blasted a shelf at random, so that the sound of smashing glass would drown out the otherworldly sound of Luna’s ethereal voice.

There were cries of surprise, and Hermione knew that their presence in the Hall along with Ron, was no longer a secret.

“Go!” Harry whispered fiercely, all but shoving her away from him. “Use your medallion. Get back to the Lake.”

“I’m not leaving you. We’ve got to get Ron.”

“Damn it, Hermione, I’ll get Ron. You have to get out of here. Now!”

Even as he spoke, an elegant Death Eater, his hair pulled back into a long, neat tail, appeared at the end of the aisle. Hermione instinctively moved in front of Harry. Do you know how important you are?

“For the love of God, Hermione, please,” Harry hissed in her ear.

The Death Eater’s mouth quirked upward in amusement.

“So good to see you both again,” said Lucius Malfoy, for it was he. “I figured one of you must be Mr. Potter. Thank you for making it quite obvious for me which one. Now, if you will kindly step aside.” He flicked his wand at Hermione.

“No!” she said, and she felt Harry all but tremble behind her. Her sweaty fingers slid on her wand; she’d never be able to raise it before she was disarmed. Harry’s arm was moving; he was going to try to get a curse off, but she wasn’t sure he’d be able to do it in time either. She knew he’d never leave Ron without finding out what happened to him.

In a lightning-fast motion, Malfoy’s wand was up.

A spell was racing toward her in a deadly arc.

Harry was shouting something frantically behind her, as she whipped her wand up from her side.

A large, dark shadow loomed over her head.

Glass shattered again, and there was a thunderous crash, as though an entire shelf had collapsed.

Something warm and heavy hit her, knocking her to the ground. The breath left her lungs.

Black spots danced before her eyes, as her head cracked painfully on the unyielding floor.

Something sticky was seeping through her clothing.

She heard Harry's hoarse scream of protest.

Somebody was laughing.

Something was on top of her. She thought she felt hair brushing her cheek.

Then there was the sensation of movement, and a rush of dizziness so profound that she knew nothing more.

TBC

Okay, I know it is unspeakably evil to leave you for 4 months with no update, and then plant a cliffhanger. But this chapter was getting so long, and I had to stop it somewhere.

So, anyway, can I make it up by saying it won't take me 4 months to update again? This was a very hard chapter to write. I felt like it was in danger of bogging down in details, but I hope it didn't.

Anyway, the end is near. Hope you are still reading and still enjoying.

You may leave a review on the way out if you like.

lorien

HHd d

Chapter Twenty-Five: Consequences

There was a cacophony of noise surrounding Hermione Granger Potter. Voices seemed to be coming from all directions at once, but they were unfathomable, distorted, almost inhuman. She wanted them to stop; nausea assailed her as she struggled to make herself speak, but her mouth felt dry and filled with cotton. Her eyelashes fluttered in an effort to open, but the heavy fingers of too-bright light pressed mercilessly on her eyelids.

She's waking up.

Thank Merlin.

She felt her arms lurch out from her sides, blindly feeling for purchase and finding none. Fingers struck something soft and smooth. She was lying in a bed... in the infirmary? The voices swirled around her again; it was all so noisy.

"Har – ry?" she managed to squeak. Her throat burned; she wondered what potion they'd force-fed her while she was unconscious. What had happened to her? She felt panic well up within her like a storm slowly beginning to rotate and strengthen. A warm hand grasped hers carefully.

I'm here.

She wanted to sob with relief. It was Harry's comforting touch, Harry's familiar hand, Harry's reassuring voice, and for the briefest of moments, those things were all that mattered.

Then her memory came back to her with a forceful tidal wave of terror.

Lucius Malfoy.

The prophecy shattered on the floor. Harry had destroyed other spheres to mask Luna's voice.

Ron had shouted somewhere. Where was he? There was noise, glass breaking, spellfire.

Harry wasn't going to leave without Ron.

She'd never be able to cast a curse in time.

"For the love of God, Hermione, please!"

She had to think of Laurel; she couldn't let herself think of Laurel. Harry was too important – too valuable.

Her mind felt frozen in icy sludge.

Something had fallen on her. There was a loud crash. A shelf?

She had hit her head.

She sucked in a frantic breath, filling her lungs with a noisy gasp, and her eyes flew open, almost of their own accord. Disheveled raven hair framed Harry's out of focus face, as he hovered anxiously over her. Blood from a laceration had dripped from his temple, drying into rivulets near the corner of his eyes, smeared where he had brushed at it in annoyance. He had obviously refused to let them see to it, in his concern over her.

"Laurel!" She wheezed in alarm on the exhalation, her free hand flying to her abdomen to feel the reassuring swell there. "I – I – something fell on me. What happened?"

"Laurel's fine," Harry whispered, brushing some of her tangled and sweat-dampened hair away from her face. She looked at him without comprehension for a moment, trying to understand the graveness in his brilliant eyes. "You've broken a couple of ribs and both collarbones. Ron – Ron came over the top of the shelves, bloody well landed on you, but he managed to get in between you and Lucius Malfoy...just in time. He was – he was cursed twice for his efforts, once by the Death Eater trying to stop him, and once by Malfoy. It was – it – " He trailed off, sounding dazed, as if he were speaking without really thinking about the words.

Hermione felt as if a giant, pitiless hand had just reached inside her chest and squeezed her heart painfully. Her lungs constricted; it hurt to breathe.

"Is he – is he – ?" She couldn't even make her lips form around the word.

Something sticky had been oozing damply through her robes. Ron's blood?

"No, but he's – he's badly hurt. He lost a lot of blood and – and they don't know..." Harry answered, his voice once again dwindling into nothingness, as he still seemed to be millions of kilometers away. A hiccupping kind of sob burbled out of Hermione's mouth, unbidden, at the uncertainty of the end of Harry's sentence.

"I want to see him..." she blurted suddenly, forcing the words through a rapidly closing throat. She pushed at the mattress, her hands sliding ineffectually on the sheets, as she tried to sit up, to swing her legs over the side.

"You aren't getting up, Hermione," Harry said, gently, but in a tone that brooked no argument. "Penelope's only just healed you up. You also took a pretty good crack on the head." He looked over his shoulder, and a sort of tremor passed over his face. "Besides, Madam Pomfrey's – they're still working...trying to stabilize him."

It was more the lost quality of Harry's expression than his warning about her health that caused Hermione to refrain from further attempts to get up. And then she thought of Ron, climbing the shelves in the Hall of Prophecies, and leaping to the floor in the effort to block her from certain injury or death.

I'll look after her with my life, Harry, you know that. Ron's sincere words swam back through her memory. He had risked his life – risked everything – to keep her safe. A persistent dull ache had begun to throb through her side when she'd moved, and she pressed one hand over the area. She'd not belittle his heroic action, by undoing what he'd tried to accomplish.

Harry must have seen the fight go out of her eyes, for he relaxed as well, still resting one hand lightly over hers. He was watching over his shoulder again, something that was out of her line of sight. She presumed that it was the mediwitches working on Ron. There was something bleak and almost fatigued, like anger or grief that was banked, but not extinguished, flickering in the depths of his eyes. She squinted up at him, trying to read his mood, and determine if all this emotion had been brought about by Ron.

He glanced down at her briefly, and obviously recognized her analytical face. He almost smiled.

“I reckon Daphne Greengrass blew the whistle on us,” he said, in a voice so devoid of emotion that he may well have been remarking on the weather. “I’m not sure how she figured out who we were, but it must have been too enticing not to turn us in.”

She always was a sharp one, Hermione remembered Blaise saying. She wondered now if there was more to Daphne’s not-quite-convincing nonchalance punctuated by flustered nervousness, as well as her remarks about not being in Gryffindor, than there initially seemed. She remembered the shuffling step as Daphne rounded the corner, almost as if she’d stumbled – it was when Harry was talking about the Hall of Prophecies. No wonder they’d known exactly where to come.

“I thought – ” Her voice gave out on her, and she had to clear her throat to resume speaking. “I thought Malfoy was just guarding the prophecy.”

“I would have thought so too,” Harry said slowly, “but that comment Malfoy made? He knew exactly who we were. And the Death Eaters showed up at the Registry as well.”

Hermione’s hand flew from her side to her mouth, in a gesture that did nothing to mask her gasp of horror and remembrance.

“Blaise – and Tonks! I – I completely forgot about them. Are they okay? Did they get the Registry?”

“Blaise got the Registry,” Harry spoke in that dead, detached sort of voice again, but his teeth actually clicked together audibly, as the muscles in his jaw trembled. “He was wounded, but he’s going to be all right.”

Hermione noticed his exclusion immediately.

“Harry, no...” she said, so brokenly that it was almost inaudible. She watched the muscles in Harry’s neck convulse, as he swallowed, struggling visibly for composure.

“Malfoy thought he’d hit you both – he started laughing like he’d bloody well gone mad. I could have – ” he paused, and amended his statement. “Perhaps I could have done something – taken him out then – and gone to help them... but I – I just fell on top of you and Ron, and used my medallion to get us the hell out of there.”

Hermione could see emotions warring in his face, guilt and self-disgust among them. He was wondering if he’d made a mistake, if the attempt on Lucius Malfoy’s life was an opportunity that should not have been passed up, if only because of what Harry’s aid might have prevented from happening later.

“Blaise returned here with the Registry – and – and Tonks – barely a moment later. He was bleeding and his arm was broken, but he was holding onto them with everything he had. She’d been hit with Avada Kedavra. And – and the look -- oh, God, Hermione – the look on Remus’ face...” Hermione was no longer sure that Harry was even aware she was there.

Michael Corner’s face flashed before her eyes, with its dull, staring-yet-unseeing slackness, the nothingness that meant the soul had flown. It had all happened so fast that she’d hardly had time to register anything. She tried to imagine the same look on Tonks – on that pert, malleable, sparkling-eyed face that seemed predisposed to impudence and irreverence – and found that she couldn’t.

“I – I can’t believe it – I – ” she tried to say.

“We shouldn’t have gone,” Harry spoke over her, as if he had not heard her at all. “We – it was self-serving, only for us – it – it – and now – now Tonks is ...”

“She wouldn’t have thought so,” came a rusty voice from behind Harry, and they both looked to see Remus at the foot of the bed, swaying as if a stiff breeze might topple him completely. He had entered the infirmary with the silence of a wraith, and the comparison was more than apt. His face was white to the lips, his eyes remote and glazed, and he seemed to have aged a decade in mere hours.

Harry dropped his eyes to the mattress, and pursed his lips together tightly. Hermione felt tears bubbling up behind her eyelids, stinging like acid.

“Remus, we’re so sorry,” she managed to whisper, with choked hoarseness. A spasm passed over the werewolf’s face, as he strove for composure.

“She – she d—died fighting... so that your little one, so – so countless other little ones would have a chance without – out from under Voldemort’s thumb, so they wouldn’t be sacrificed to his – his tyranny. She would have considered death well w – worth it...” His voice vibrated under the last part of what he said, and he lowered his gaze to where his fingers were clenched around the bedrail to keep from trembling.

“She was a hero, Remus,” Hermione said, feeling his given name slip rather awkwardly from her lips. “But I – I know that doesn’t make it any easier to bear.”

Lupin looked somewhere beyond her, and shook his head with a wry and bitter half-smile.

“No,” he said, almost to himself. “No, it doesn’t.” He turned from them, as if to leave, but didn’t appear to know what he should do next, as he gazed emptily around the infirmary. Harry had shifted so that his back was to Hermione, and he cocked his head, appearing to be signaling someone from across the room.

A moment later, Luna had floated into view at Lupin's elbow, carrying a flagon of something that steamed slightly. Her large blue eyes were as solemn and compassionate as Hermione had ever seen them.

"Here, Professor," she said serenely. "You ought to take this, and maybe rest for awhile." She gave him the container, and he did not turn it down, as she put one hand at his elbow and guided him from the infirmary.

Hermione felt inexorable fatigue, initiated by her injuries, and fueled by the grief that seemed to be methodically shredding her insides with vicious claws. Harry was sitting on the edge of her bed, elbows on knees, and posture looking even more defeated than before. She wanted to reach out to him, but he seemed somehow distant from her, locked away in pain and worry and despair of his own that she could not access.

Tonks is dead... and Ron is – is – it was unfathomable, not to be believed, not to be borne. When will this all be over? She wondered, as she began to sink back into oblivion, even as she fought against it.

She felt Harry's hand on hers again, lightly, and knew that whatever happened, she could handle, as long as he stayed with her, as long as he loved her.

As from a great distance, she heard his voice saying, "Go to sleep, Hermione. I'll wake you if there's news of Ron."

She woke as she had that first morning after the Battle at Hogwarts, when Harry was gone and everything was wrong. She blinked, sandy-eyed, and wondered why she was sad and why there was an aching, empty feeling somewhere in the region of her chest.

Tonks is dead, she remembered suddenly, and the grief and regret flashed white-hot within her.

The infirmary was only dimly lit, and Hermione was vaguely aware of subtle movement in the shadows. She wasn't sure how long she'd been asleep this time, but it appeared to be what passed for nighttime

in the cavern. Over to her left, she heard soft conversation. Without raising her head from the pillow, she turned it to the side.

In the low light, she saw Harry, ensconced in a chair, with his feet propped up in a second, looking rumpled enough to disclose that he had evidently been sleeping in that chair for some time. Across from him, straddling a chair the wrong way and leaning with earnestly folded arms onto its back was Blaise Zabini.

“... you’ve got to believe me, Harry,” Blaise was saying quietly, and there was a note of pleading in his voice that Hermione would not have believed possible of the Slytherin. “Daphne – she – I really thought she could be trusted, and – ” He clawed his fingers backward through his hair, and looked absolutely distraught. “It’s all my fault. All of it. I thought – I thought I knew her, and – and – ” His voice gave out under a wave of emotion, and when he got in under control and spoke again, it was more casual, the deliberately conversational air that seemed more endemic to him. “Fred would like to kill me,” he added, with forced nonchalance. “And Professor Lupin couldn’t even bring himself to look at me.” He sank into a mutter, but raised his voice once again, as he lifted his eyes to Harry’s. “You don’t know how glad I am that nothing happened to you or Hermione – or the baby.”

Harry sat in momentary silence, the shadows making his face look as grimly brooding as one who sits in judgment. After only a brief period, he shifted and sighed, destroying that illusion, and said,

“I believe you.”

Blaise’s eyebrows shot upward, his eyes clearly conveying, Really? Out loud, he merely said,

“Thank you.”

“If you had sold us out – or if Daphne’s original intention had been to turn us in from the start, it would have been much easier just to have a team of Death Eaters waiting on us down in those tunnels beneath the Ministry,” Harry added, by way of explanation, even though Blaise had not asked for one. “Why risk letting us into the Ministry at all?”

Why bring us fake identification and recalibrators for our wands? Why let us get so close to our goal?" These were all really very good questions, Hermione thought, but she already knew the answer; indeed, Harry had told her as much, during their earlier conversation. "Somehow, Daphne figured out who we were – Harry Potter himself, and his illustrious companions," he finally said, his voice ringing faintly with sarcasm. "And it was too good for her to pass up – even for you."

Something rather curious throbbed in the undertone beneath Harry's voice on those last three words. Zabini looked up in faint surprise, met Harry's eyes, and then swore in admission, lowering his forehead into a cupped palm.

"I always had this kind of half-arsed crush on her," Blaise finally said, with a bitter laugh rippling under his words. "I think I felt sorry for her a little – she always seemed to be on the fringe of things in school, always seemed a little half-hearted joining in the pure-blooded rhetoric and bullshit. Parkinson and Bulstrode ran her roughshod, and I – I think I just wanted to protect her." He seemed to be scrubbing at his face with his hands, as if he could somehow wipe away everything that had happened that day. "Maybe she – maybe she was always as – as devoted as everyone else in Slytherin. Maybe I just saw what I wanted to see."

"You've been seeing things in black and white since you've been with us," Harry remarked, in a somewhat philosophical tone. "For Voldemort or against Voldemort. Not very Slytherin of you at all. Daphne Greengrass was looking out for Daphne Greengrass."

"I reckon she's made her choice then," Blaise said, with an acrid bite to his tone. His face seemed to almost pinch in on itself with guilt and bitter recrimination.

Harry's mouth crimped a little in sympathy.

"I reckon she has."

"The Records Room was empty," Blaise began, in what sounded like a non sequitur. Hermione had trouble following him at first, but

realized that he was going to tell Harry what had happened while they had been trying to extricate themselves from the Hall of Prophecies. He was speaking in the rote, mechanical way of one who must relate what happened, before the words tear one apart from the inside. "It was like nobody had been down there in years – and especially not for the purpose of casting any Dust Repelling charms. There must be hundreds of battered, old, leather-bound ledgers in there. We thought the Registry might be sitting out somewhere – and Tonks was concerned about possible wards – so we did a circuit of the room first." His face contained profound regret, as he was obviously thinking that if they'd just Summoned the book and gotten out of there, that Tonks might still be alive.

"Finally, Tonks Accioed the Registry, and it just sailed right out of a shelf into our arms. No wards on it or anything. We – we couldn't believe it could be so easy." He shook his head with the terrible knowledge of hindsight. "Then, the door blew open. The pane of glass in the door was smashed, and we could barely see through all the smoke. Tonks started throwing curses faster than I could see – and I could tell she was trying to advance toward the door, cut her way through the attack, even though we couldn't even tell who was attacking us yet."

Hermione felt the familiar stinging sensation in her eyes and nose again, as she realized what Tonks had been intending. She was coming for us. Somehow she knew we'd all been betrayed. There probably wasn't a thought in her mind about using her medallion to return, not without ascertaining our safety.

"I was hit first," Zabini was still speaking in that detached tone of voice. "When the – when the bone in my arm snapped, my fingers went completely numb. I – I dropped the Registry, and when I went to pick it up, I was hit with some kind of Cutting curse or something. I was trying to reach the book with my good hand – and keep hold of my wand at the same time. I – I think I screamed." He sounded almost disgusted with himself, dismissive of the amount of pain he must have been enduring at the time. "Tonks turned to help me. She ducked under my shoulder to help me stand, had the Registry trapped between our bodies. And then – s – somebody – a Death

Eater stepped out of the confusion by the door, and – and – ” He didn’t finish, but he didn’t have to.

Hit her with the Avada Kedavra, Hermione supplied for him.

“Who was it?” Harry asked suddenly, his abrupt question surprising both Blaise and Hermione.

“What?” Zabini replied.

“Who cursed her? You must have seen them. You even started to say so.”

Blaise looked like a strange combination of sullen and compassionate, as he looked directly into Harry’s face and replied,

“Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Harry moved so suddenly that the chair made a scraping noise against the floor, and he swore under his breath. Hermione could not fathom the untenable cruelty and malice of it all. The Death Eaters had been firing non-lethal curses, curses meant to incapacitate and capture, not to kill. Every member of the Order had knowledge that would be invaluable to the Death Eaters – knowledge that, when ripped forcibly from their minds, could put a decisive end to the war. And Lestrange had not been able to see past her hatred and resentment of her baby sister, who had disdained pureblood politics, to follow orders. She had murdered her own niece.

It wasn’t war; it was personal, Hermione realized with horror, unaware that she had gasped aloud at Blaise’s disclosure, until she felt two pairs of eyes turn toward her. Her eavesdropping so blatantly discovered, she could not help but flush uncomfortably.

Something lit up in the depths of Harry’s eyes.

“You’re awake,” he commented somewhat unnecessarily. Hermione forced the corners of her mouth upward in a slight smile, though she was still thinking about a woman so consumed by evil that she could commit murder for a murderer, that she would cut down family with

cold-blooded and decisive deliberation. Harry seemed to read some of what she was thinking in her eyes, because he turned back toward Blaise, and said, "I'm not sure I'd mention that to Remus – unless he asks directly."

Blaise's eyes were twin pools of desolation.

"What good would it do now?" he asked bleakly. He stood slowly and carefully, as if his bones were made of glass, or as if he carried a weighty burden already over-encumbered shoulders.

"About the other..." Harry called quietly after him. "You've already proven yourself more than once – nobody ... nobody is going to blame you, not really. They – they'll just need time."

"Time?" Blaise's smile was at once wistful and sardonic. "The one thing we really don't have in overabundance, isn't it, Potter?"

He turned and left the infirmary without another word, as Harry and Hermione watched him go silently, the weight of his guilt and loss and shame and his outsider-ness hanging in the room like a pall of smoke. They sighed in tandem, and looked at each other helplessly, each unable to come up with any words of wisdom for the other.

In the ensuing quiet, Hermione pushed herself upright in the bed. The pain in her side had receded to a tense, stretchy soreness; the bone-knitting elixir had clearly done its job.

"I want to see Ron," she said, before Harry could give voice to the obvious Hermione, what are you doing? that seemed to be hovering on his lips and in his eyes. Rather than arguing, he acquiesced with a nod, and stood, extending an arm to help her slide off of the bed.

"He woke for just a little while earlier, but – but he was unconscious again almost immediately," he supplied informatively.

"How is he?" she asked, in a quick, clipped way, obviously as worried as he was. Harry lifted his shoulders, as he delved his free hand into his pocket, his other hand still supporting her.

“His stomach was slashed open,” Harry said, the words coming out slowly, as if against his will. “Penelope – Penelope said that Madam Pomfrey was working as fast as she could for awhile, repairing his organs, trying to stay ahead of the next failure. They – they’re waiting now to see if the damage was too great or if – if the repairs will hold.”

They were nearing his bedside now, and Hermione felt her lips tremble at how gray and pale Ron looked, his shock of ginger hair the only vivid thing about him. Her legs felt loose and wobbly, and she slid her hand out of Harry’s to prop herself against the edge of Ron’s mattress. She lay the back of her other hand against his forehead, dismayed at how papery warm his skin felt. His breathing was rapid and shallow through slightly parted lips. She barely registered Mr. Weasley, propped awkwardly in another chair nearby, sleeping fitfully.

“Ron...” she started, and the syllable was barely intelligible through her hot, clogged throat. There were a thousand things she wanted to say, and yet none, because to say those things would be to admit that she presumed his death to be inevitable, and she wasn’t ready to admit that either. There were things, also, that she wasn’t comfortable saying with her husband hovering behind her – and really, what good were the words anyway? I’m sorry I didn’t love you like you wanted me to?

Ron’s eyes moved suddenly beneath his lids, and he struggled to force them open, the pale lashes fluttering in agitation. He turned his head toward them, toward her voice, very slowly, as if it were the rotation of some monstrously heavy cog, and not the simple act of a group of muscles.

“H...mione,” he rasped in recognition. His eyes flickered briefly over her shoulder, and he acknowledged Harry with a ghost of a smile. “Mate.”

“How are you feeling?” Harry asked solicitously, his tone completely missing casual and sounding somber and worried.

“Mus’ be pretty bad,” Ron slurred. “Or – or y’wouldn’t be looking at me like that.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ron,” Hermione said, and nearly winced with how high and shrill and nearly hysterical her voice sounded, warbling unnaturally from her shaky mouth. She glanced quickly at him, mortified, and noticed that his eyes were almost glinting with suppressed laughter.

“Always figured ‘swhy you... didn’t like t’lie,” he said. “‘Coz you’re not very good... at it.”

She swallowed hard, and dropped the pretense, taking his limp fingers in hers.

“Don’t say things like that,” she whispered. “You – you gave us all quite a fright there for awhile, but – but things are looking up.”

She felt Harry move behind her, felt the warm comfort of the touch of his hand on her hip.

“But you – you’re all right?” Ron asked. “He – he di’n’t hit you? Baby’s all right?”

“They’re fine – both fine,” Harry said, his voice vibrating the air behind her. “I – I don’t know what we would’ve done if you hadn’t gotten there when you did, Ron.”

Ron’s eyes slid shut in a blend of fatigue and pain, but his mouth smiled.

“Good,” he said, and there was unmitigated satisfaction in that word.

Hermione and Harry watched him for a long moment, Hermione’s gaze fixed on the slight movement of Ron’s chest, willing it to continue to rhythmically rise and fall. When she tried to extricate her hand from his, his fingers tightened feebly around hers.

“Don’ go...” he said, in a barely audible plea. She shook her head in response, even though his eyes were still closed, and gently pulled her hand free.

"You need to rest, Ron," she said, brushing his hair away from his forehead with the faintest of caresses. "You need to rest, and get better. Soon. We can't do this without you, you know." She cast a stricken look at Harry, who looked just as torn up as she, and he dropped a comforting kiss in her hair.

"Okay, H'mione..." he said in an acquiescent voice, though the words were still barely intelligible. "Always did... better when I le' you boss me 'round."

She clamped tightly onto Harry's arm, as he walked her back to her bed on the other side of the infirmary, her fingers like talons clutching his sleeve. Only when they had both taken a seat on the edge of her bed, did she let herself quietly collapse, crying as she had not let herself cry in quite some time. The hiccupping sobs rattled down her chest into her side, awakening a nagging pain there, but she didn't care.

"He's going to die, isn't he, Harry? Oh God, isn't he?"

"I – I don't know, Hermione," Harry said in a strained voice, holding her tightly against him, as if in doing so, he could absorb her pain and grief into himself somehow. "I don't know."

But Ron didn't die. He remained gaunt and pale, eating little and sleeping most of the time. The cruel slashes left by the Death Eater's wand were clearly no ordinary wounds, and, while they had closed relatively neatly, remained thick, ropy welts of lurid purple. His breathing was still raspy and labored, and sustaining conversation clearly took much effort on his part.

Nevertheless, he began to improve slowly, a little at a time, insisting on being present at Tonks' memorial service two days later, over the half-hearted protests over Penelope and Madam Pomfrey. He was not yet able to sit up, but had pleaded with such unusual eloquence to attend that the mediwitches had given in, adding wheels to his bed, and trundling him out into the main body of the cavern.

Hermione and Harry, standing close to a barely functional Remus Lupin, had exchanged satisfied glances and intertwined their hands, feeling mutual satisfaction that Hermione's hysterical prediction was

proving to be untrue. Hermione saw Harry's chin lift in acknowledgment of Ron's presence, and, as Fred moved with Ginny to stand beside him, Ron nodded in response to the salute.

All eyes turned instinctively toward Minerva McGonagall, who seemed to be the one they looked to as a symbolic leader, when they needed some kind of ceremonial undertaking performed, whether it was wedding or funeral. Her eyes were somber and moist, and Hermione knew that she was remembering Nymphadora Tonks as a student of her still-beloved school.

With a flick of her wand, the Headmistress gracefully transported the sheet-enshrouded body, already placed under stasis charms from its spot of repose behind a divider in an unused room. As if under its own power, the drape wafted back, exposing the unmarred body of Tonks, who looked as if she might have only been asleep.

"Let us look one last time upon one whom we considered the dearest of friends," McGonagall intoned. There was a flicker of movement at the periphery of Hermione's vision, and she looked to see Harry physically holding Remus upright; the werewolf's knees had buckled beneath him at McGonagall's words.

Hermione tried to force herself to look dispassionately at Tonks, noting with amazement that her true form, the one to which she had reverted upon death, had hair that was raven-dark, with mahogany glints. She looks like Sirius, she thought in awe, wondering how she'd never noted the family resemblance before. Tonks' hands were folded across her chest, clasping her wand, and her lashes were fanned like inky smudges across porcelain cheeks.

The clatter of stone against stone jolted Hermione from her thoughts, and she saw that Mr. Weasley had begun to remove the barrier from the carved niche tucked into one corner of the cave. It was their morgue, where, until this moment, only Michael's body had lain. There was a hushed sob from Padma, as the small chamber was exposed, and Cho cupped one hand around her shoulder comfortingly. The silence seemed to thread around them, grief too deep for words, loss piled on top of already intolerable loss, until

Hermione thought she would choke on it. She squeezed Harry's hand tighter.

Blaise stepped up from his place next to Seamus, and cleared his throat awkwardly, drawing the somewhat surprised glances of the other Order members.

"I – I didn't know Tonks as well as most of you," he began hesitantly, but his voice grew more confident as he spoke, "but I know she was an Auror – a damn good one, from what I heard – and that she used her skills on the side of Light to the best of her ability. She – she saved my life, and without her... this mission would not have succeeded as it did. Because of her... sacrifice, the identities of wizarding babies will be kept safe. I won't forget it, and – and if we make it through this war, I'll see that others don't forget it either."

"Hear, hear," came an affirmation from a surprising quarter – Ron.

Mr. Weasley spoke a few words, as did Fleur, Fred, and Ginny. Professor McGonagall related some of her anecdotal knowledge of Tonks from her schoolroom days. Just when silence had reasserted itself among the gathering, Hermione felt Harry's hand twitch slightly in hers, and she knew that he was going to speak.

"Tonks never faltered when it was time to carry out a mission," he began, and his wife could hear the tightness of the control over his voice; he was speaking as if the words were brittle, fragile things that might break between his teeth. "Even as far back as our fifth year, she was openly defying those who would follow Voldemort, risking her life to keep people safe, even at the cost of opposing family." Hermione's eyes flickered involuntarily across to Blaise, remembering what he had disclosed to them. "She didn't not hesitate to act on this mission either, and because of her – because of her, there are babies out there – and here now – with a hope for the future." His voice wobbled slightly. Hermione looked over at Fleur, who was standing rigidly, beautiful features almost frozen, her hands locked across her swollen belly. "Hermione and I will certainly not forget what she gave up and for whom – and we don't intend that Laurel shall forget either." He looked earnestly up at Remus then, and added, "She'll know what a lion of Gryffindor her Auntie Tonks was."

Hermione clamped her lips together so that she wouldn't make any noise, even as the tears rushed unbidden to her eyes and began to stream down her cheeks.

Remus made an involuntarily move toward Tonks, one hand upraising slightly, as though he might reach for her, but he arrested the motion awkwardly.

"Tonks..." he sighed. "Nymph, love..." He faltered over the pet name that she would have never let him use in public, and he hung his head, shaking it in helplessness and despair, one lock of brown hair tumbling across his forehead.

When it became clear that Remus wasn't able to say anything more, Harry nodded subtly to McGonagall, who closed the ceremony, and began to move Tonks' body toward the small chamber, where it would rest in the company of Michael Corner, until such time as they could properly inter them.

Hermione couldn't help but flinch as the recently removed stone was returned into place – it sounded so bleakly final, as bad as the clods of dirt spilling onto the Evans' and Percy's coffins. She had followed the path of Tonks' body, as it arced through the air toward the darkened entry, but she turned her head decisively away, her eyes again landing on Fleur.

The half-Veela, as beautiful as she had always been – perhaps more so now, even in the late stages of pregnancy – was still standing stiffly, as if she were holding herself in absolute check. Hermione regarded her more closely, now out of concerned curiosity, and noted that she was clasping her hands together so tightly that her knuckles were bone-white. And then, even as she watched, Fleur let herself relax, ever so slightly, letting out an inaudible sigh, discernible only by the slight parting of her lips.

She's having contractions, Hermione noted astutely, and she didn't want to disrupt the memorial service.

As the burial chamber was sealed once again, the Order began to move and mingle, most stopping to offer a comforting word or gesture to Remus. After checking to make sure that Harry remained with him, Hermione moved quickly and quietly to Fleur's side.

"You should be headed in that direction as well, shouldn't you?" she asked, nodding her head after Penelope and Madam Pomfrey, who were transporting Ron back to the infirmary. Fleur looked at her in mild surprise, and let out a short exhalation of air through her nostrils.

"How did you know?"

"I was watching you," she replied. "When did they start?"

"This morning," Fleur answered. "Penelope told me it could take hours. The contractions have not been bad until the hour or so. But I think – I think it will be soon now." She hissed in air through her teeth, and stood very still again, until the vise-grip of pain eased, and she said, very softly, "Oh, Bill..."

Hermione could not help but toss a grateful glance back in Harry's direction, as she took Fleur's elbow and walked with her in the same direction that Ron and the mediwitches had gone.

When they arrived through the dividers that delineated the infirmary, Penelope and Madam Pomfrey were moving anxiously over Ron's bedside. The Hogwarts' mediwitch had lifted Ron's gown away from his side, and she was examining his still livid-looking wounds with mild concern.

"Is Ron all right?" Hermione asked worriedly. Ron appeared to be hovering on the edges of consciousness, and Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips in his direction.

"He appears to be doing as well as can be expected," she said, in a tone that implied that that was not actually very well at all. "I'm afraid that even that slight exertion was too much for him, too soon."

"Couldn't not go," Ron drawled, barely moving his mouth enough to let the syllables escape. He slipped into slumber then, and Penelope

scanned him briefly with her wand, before checking his pulse and temperature, then reattaching him to the various potions he had been absorbing.

Madam Pomfrey turned more fully toward them, and seemed to realize who exactly was standing there for the first time.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Potter, Mrs. Weasley?” she said, in the formal tone she sometimes still adopted when addressing potential patients.

At that moment, Fleur grabbed Hermione’s hand, clamping it between her own arm and her body, as she bent slightly, closing her eyes, and visibly riding out the pain. Hermione flung a knowing glance at the mediwitch, as her question had indeed been duly answered, but responded to the query anyway.

“I reckon you can deliver a baby.”

Fleur groaned loudly, a growly, throaty sound that seemed to dredge up from the depths of her abdomen and force its way through her teeth. Her face was red with the effort, the cords stood out in her slender neck, and her golden hair stuck damply to her cheeks and the back of her neck. Hermione felt like she must be at least as sweaty as Fleur, and was nearly certain that she still didn’t look as good.

“You’re nearly there, Mrs. Weasley,” Madam Pomfrey said, in what seemed to be almost a croon. “One or two more pushes should do it. Wait for the next contraction.”

Fleur flopped backwards onto the inclined mattress, breathing heavily from fatigue rather than pain – the potion having done its work well – and Hermione used the opportunity to dab her clammy skin with a washcloth that had been charmed to stay refreshingly cool.

“How are you doing?” she asked in a low voice, trying to mimic the soothing tone of the mediwitch. Fleur looked at her, her startlingly vivid eyes more shadowed than normal.

"I miss Bill," she said simply. Hermione brushed some of her damp hair back from her forehead.

"I know."

A small, colored emblem hovering in mid-air near Fleur's abdomen began to chime, and Madam Pomfrey crouched at the end of the bed again.

"Here comes another one. Are you ready to push?"

"I... suppose..." Fleur ground out, as Hermione pushed her back into an upright position, bracing her with a mild Repelling charm. She lifted the weight of her own hair away from her prickly neck, and wondered how long they'd been back here, behind the drawn curtains, Silencioed so as to not disturb Ron. It had probably only been several hours, though it felt like at least a day. She had only left Fleur's side twice, to make reports to the anxious row of Weasleys – and Harry – lined up in the infirmary waiting for word.

"Here he comes," was the triumphant declaration from Fleur's feet, and Hermione noticed that Madam Pomfrey had taken it for granted, as had Fleur, that it would be a boy.

"Red hair?" Fleur managed to croak.

"Not much of any hair at all. Keep pushing," the mediwitch instructed. Hermione noticed Penelope standing by with a warmed blanket, ready to take the baby as soon as the cord had been cut.

Fleur's final push ended in a helplessly worn out squeak that merged into the lusty wail of a newborn baby.

"It's a boy!" Madam Pomfrey exclaimed, and Hermione felt tears standing in her eyes, as Fleur's face crumpled in equal parts joy and sadness.

"Can I have him? Can I see him please?" she asked, already trying to sit up again, and look at the tiny person making so much noise.

The mediwitches cut the cord, and used a gentle obstetrical charm to clean him off, before Penelope wound him in the blanket, and brought him to Fleur. He was a big baby, red and wrinkled, and had ceased squalling, but was looking around him with a disgruntled air, as if he didn't think much of the world into which he'd been flung.

Hermione reached out with two fingers to touch the downy softness on his head, and felt Laurel kick vigorously inside her. Soon, she thought – soon that'll be me...and our baby – mine and Harry's.

Out loud she said,

“He's beautiful.”

“He's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. Look at his hair!” Fleur's French accent seemed to grow even thicker in a voice already clogged with tears. Madam Pomfrey had been right; he didn't have much hair to speak of, but what was there was a fiery gold, not flaxen like Fleur's, but neither the vivid red that was the Weasleys' trademark. It was as if his delicate head had been gilded ever so slightly.

“Shall I get the family?” Hermione asked, as Madam Pomfrey began efficiently casting charms to clean Fleur and the immediate vicinity. Penelope came and took the baby, over Fleur's slight bleat of protest, but she was assured,

“Only for a moment – to weigh and measure him. I'll bring him right back.”

Fleur nodded at Hermione.

“They can come in.” Hermione slipped out between the curtains, expelling a breath upward to push her hair away from her sticky face, and laughed as Fred, Mr. Weasley, and Harry all stood expectantly.

“It's a boy,” she announced, and watched in satisfaction, as a musical laugh trilled from Ginny's throat and the Weasley men and Harry shook hands and clapped each other on the back, as if it were their

son entering the world. And, in a way, it might as well be, Hermione mused.

“How’s Fleur?” Fred asked, after a moment of celebration.

“She’s fine – it – she was really incredible in there,” Hermione said sincerely, wondering if she could have been so stoic, delivering a child without his father. “She’d like you to come in now,” she remembered to say, just as Madam Pomfrey drew the curtains aside to reveal Fleur reclined almost regally in the bed, a blanket-swathed bundle tucked securely in her arms.

Mr. Weasley was the first one to her side, gently pushing aside the edge of the blanket to get a good look. Shining wetness swam in his eyes.

“My grandson...” he murmured. “What are you going to call him?”

Fleur smiled mistily, as she used one hand to dash away the tears that couldn’t help but escape anyway.

“William,” she said, her voice almost cracking in the middle of the word.

“Junior?” Ginny wondered aloud, waiting quietly for her turn to hold the baby.

“No,” Fleur corrected gently. “William Percival Weasley.”

“Oh...” Mr. Weasley breathed reverently, almost as if he didn’t dare believe it. “Oh, that is nice, Fleur. They would like that...so much.”

Blinking back the persistent tears, Hermione noticed Penelope smile a wobbly smile at the announcement of the baby’s name and glide softly to a divider, leaning through it to speak, her voice soft and indistinct. For the first time, she noticed the low murmur of voices beyond, and realized that the birth of this baby, this new Weasley, was as much an event for the others as it was for those closest to that family. A symbol, she recalled Ginny’s words, like her and Harry’s wedding, like the Christmas feast, a sign – a hope – that the

world really wanted to go about its normal business of living, and that someday they would achieve that goal. At the same time, that hope caused an edge of tension – she knew what would have to happen before everything could come to fruition and restoration – if indeed it happened at all.

She sighed tremulously, as she watched the tableau at Fleur's bedside, the only thing marring it the absence of Ron in the circle of shining ginger heads. She felt the solid warmth of Harry's presence behind her, and she leaned back against his chest without even looking.

"Soon we'll see our baby," he murmured, his breath warm and tantalizing against her ear. She arched her neck away from the shudder it sent through her, and her mouth twisted upward in a wistful smile.

"I can't wait to meet her," she admitted ruefully, as she caressed the sides of her abdomen with open palms. "But I'm so worried... about – about what kind of – what will – everything seems to be spinning faster..." She had trouble articulating the tension that snaked through her, and she lifted her chin to look at him, her eyes limpid and troubled.

His gaze was an emerald mirror of hers.

"You feel it too, don't you?" he said, his tone too certain to really be an interrogative.

"Feel what?" she asked, her words sounding almost like a feeble denial.

"The sand slipping through the hourglass. The clock chiming the hour. It's almost time." His words were unusually and almost poetically cryptic, and his gaze had shuttered. Hermione was uncomfortably reminded of the period during which he'd been under the influence of the vial. He seemed to be seeing beyond her somehow, gazing at some bleak vista that was out of her sight.

She turned more fully toward him, placing one hand flat on his chest.

“Harry?” She kept her voice low, so as to not alarm the others thronging about the baby, but a definite hum of concern threaded through her voice. The random comparison to the Circle’s influence jolted suddenly through her mind again, and she was afraid. But it was gone... we – we eradicated it – it has to be gone.

He must have seen some of the utter alarm dilate her eyes, turning them into ebony pools, because he looked suddenly and sharply down into her face.

“What’s wrong?”

“You – you sounded odd,” she replied, keeping her voice barely audible. “It reminded me of the Circle.” She half-expected him to laugh off the notion, but he did not. Instead, his hand floated absent-mindedly up to rub the scar on his forehead.

“Funny you should say that,” he quipped, wincing a little. “Ever since you and Ron broke the hold it had on me, it’s like there’s been a – an echo maybe, or an imprint left.”

“Of Voldemort?” She queried, her voice abrupt and worried. At his nod, she added, “Worse than your scar?”

“Not – not worse exactly... just different. It’s been faint – and I don’t think it is going to control me or anything, but – but I can just feel that time is running out. The feeling’s gotten even stronger – worse – since – since Ron...and Tonks. It’s going to be soon.”

“Harry!” The word was a fiercely beseeching plea. The hand she had laid on his chest curled into a fist, clenching the material of his shirt in its grasp. “Harry, what’s going to be soon?”

He shook his head helplessly, his eyebrows flattening into a low and brooding line that hooded his brilliant eyes.

“I...don’t...know.” His gaze had gone dark and distant again. “But I think... it’s about time we told Neville to make his move on the Primes.”

Hermione tossed and turned for over an hour later that night, before finally giving up and clambering out of the bed. The cavern was dim and silent for the night, as she exited the divider to the sound of Harry's soft snores. She felt a momentary flash of irritation at him for filling her head with worries and then "leaving" her to fret over them while he slept. Almost instantly, she was mildly ashamed, knowing how few nights of truly refreshing sleep he was given.

There was low light from the infirmary, and a shadow flitted across the divider. Hermione assumed that someone was up, assisting Fleur or tending to Ron. She decided against poking her head inside, not wanting to invite a lecture on proper rest for expectant mothers from Madam Pomfrey.

As she turned toward the small section of cave that served as her and Fred's laboratory of sorts, however, she was surprised to see that selfsame Weasley there, bathed in the low light of a lamp, hunched over their workstation so intently that he did not hear her approach.

"Keeping awfully late hours, aren't we?" she asked casually, a slight smile evident in her voice.

"It's this slavedriver of a boss, you see," Fred responded in kind. "She's this really swotty know-it-all..." He finally turned around so that she could see the twinkle lurking in his eyes, but the pleasant, if subdued, expression vanished from his face when he saw hers. "What's going on?" Wariness flashed back into his eyes.

"I can't sleep," she sighed, flinging her hands upward as if to say, the very idea! "Harry is – he said some things earlier that – it reminded me of the vial. He said that it had left an imprint behind."

Fred instantly became very concerned.

"It's not still in his mind? I thought we'd gotten it."

"No, no," Hermione hastened to correct him. "He said it wasn't controlling him or anything, but it was like ... like there was an afterimage left or something. Similar to his scar – just another way for

him and Voldemort to be on the same wavelength, I guess, and he – Harry thinks it's going to be soon.”

Fred did not have to ask what “it” signified.

“I just keep thinking that there has got to be some way we can use the contents of that vial to our advantage...” she finished helplessly. Fred was shaking his head.

“It's resisted all our attempts to break it down, to alter it, to immerse it in a potion...” he made a swirling gesture with his hand, clearly saying, I could go on, but you know all this already.

There was silence as both of them mused separately, each lost in their own troubles, when Hermione suddenly straightened.

“Wait a minute,” she said, knowing that her eyes were beginning to flash with excitement. She had actually said it herself, actually voiced the clue, and hadn't even realized it. One corner of Fred's mouth had tilted upward in a slight smirk.

“What have you thought of?” he asked admiringly.

“Wavelengths – they're on – they're on the same wavelength!” She could tell Fred wasn't really following her, but her brain was spinning off in this exhilarating new direction, moving faster than her mouth could compensate. She stopped and took several breaths in succession, hoping for a way to explain this adequately, so that Fred could join in her brainstorming session.

“Do you remember how I told you that I extracted Harry's magical signature from the repository stone?”

“Because you didn't want to risk extracting some of what little magic he had from him directly – yes, I remember. You used it to customize that Masking charm for him.”

“And why do you think that Circle seemed to pinpoint Harry specifically?”

“Because Voldemort created it,” Fred replied easily and without hesitation.

“But why? Why does that automatically mean Harry will be affected?”

“Because they’re linked through Harry’s scar.” Again, Fred’s answer was prompt and confident. Hermione couldn’t help but smile, as if Fred was playing right into her line of theorizing.

“But why?” she asked again.

Fred opened his mouth to speak, but did not, clearly unable to continue down Hermione’s path.

“It all makes sense!” She exulted, her voice a hiss of excitement. “It explains why Harry’s wand is a brother to Voldemort’s. It might even explain why Voldemort felt somehow drawn to mark Harry as his equal that Halloween. Or why some of Voldemort’s powers transferred so easily to Harry...”

“That’s fascinating, Hermione,” Fred said, in a long-suffering voice, teasing underlying his tone. “But would you mind explaining it to me?”

“Their magical signatures! I’m not sure what exactly determines the look of someone’s magical signature, but they’re supposed to be as individual as fingerprints. But what if – what if – Harry and Voldemort have magical signatures that are nearly identical to each other’s?”

“And those similar signatures selected nearly identical wands?” Fred said slowly, as he cottoned on to what Hermione was trying to say.

“And might have a tendency to easily link or interact with each other...” Hermione finished.

“So if the Circle’s essence ‘attached’ itself to Harry,” Fred postulated, turning toward the magical field housing the vial within it, and poking at it with his wand. The viscous fell smoke roiled inside, as if in protest. “And now we’ve got this...”

“I’d be willing to wager that we’ve got a copy of Voldemort’s magical signature right there,” she finished.

“Brilliant!” Fred exclaimed in understated praise. “And how do we use that to our advantage?”

Hermione’s eyes were contemplative, almost turned inward, as she spoke slowly, clearly formulating her plan even as the words left her lips.

“I’ve got the empty repository stone,” she said. “The one that was keyed to Harry’s magical signature until I removed it. If we can key that to Voldemort’s signature – then we may be able to...”

“Do unto Voldemort as he did unto Harry?” Fred questioned, in a lightly-spoken, apt Muggle reference that made Hermione blink at him in slight surprise.

“If we could get to him somehow, and drain his magic – but I don’t know that one stone would be enough. There were dozens in that cell with Harry – and even then, it took time to remove. He – he said it was quite painful...” She tried to continue speaking with clinical detachment, but didn’t really succeed.

“But – but you said Voldemort was afraid to face Harry himself. He had those repository stones doing all the work for him.”

“What do you mean?”

“If there was a way that we could – could embed that repository stone with Voldemort’s magical signature in Harry’s wand. And there was a spell that could – could call to that signature in Voldemort... with Harry’s being so similar...if it is that similar...”

“Priori Incantatem,” Hermione breathed in a barely audible voice. “Harry could call the magic out himself. It would probably go much faster that way.”

“We’d need to be sure that the two signatures really were almost exactly alike,” Fred pointed out.

"I'll not extract any of Harry's magic now," Hermione refused staunchly. "He's only now returning to normal levels. We don't even know how any removal would affect him, or how fast he could regenerate it."

"So we go back to the Riddle house and get another stone," Fred suggested casually. His eyes sparked suddenly, and he stood up from where he'd been lackadaisically leaned back against the worktable. "Better yet, we go back and get all of them – by their very nature, aren't they storage devices? If you can extract Harry's magical signature from them, why couldn't you extract the magic contained there? It would take a more specialized spell, but..."

Hermione felt her heart begin to slam into the wall of her chest, as she thought about what Fred was saying, calling herself six kinds of an idiot for not having seen it before.

"Are you – do you mean – ?"

"If they took it out of Harry, it had to go somewhere, didn't it?"

"It never even – I never dreamed – they'd just leave it – right where –"
"Hermione couldn't finish, and she almost wanted to laugh as she thought of Harry's bitter, yet unknowingly appropriate, words to her that day long ago in the safehouse.

Magic would be a lot harder to come by, wouldn't it?

And her reply, there's not exactly a surplus of spare magic lying about, is there?

"Could we – " she stammered, almost hoarsely, then cleared her throat and began again. "Would we be able to ... to put it back?"

"I don't know that it's ever been done before. But – but you and Ron seem to be able to link up to his mind fairly easily. If you were ... facilitating the exchange, then I reckon anything's possible."

Hermione stood very still, fist pressed against her mouth, eyes moving rapidly, as she thought intensely about what Fred was saying. As she came to decision, she dropped her hand, and looked over at the remaining Weasley twin with brisk and businesslike intent.

"Well, then, let's go."

"Go?" Fred looked taken aback. "Go where?"

"To the Riddle house," she explained in an overly patient voice, as if to a very slow child. "To get the other repository stones. We'll check the Map, but Voldemort seems to be staying close to Hogwarts these days."

"You – you're not going," Fred nearly spluttered, as if unable to believe that she had even suggested it.

"Don't be ridiculous, Fred," Hermione said, keeping her voice cool and level. "Ron and I are the only ones who've been through the wards. And Ron's not exactly in a state to go, is he? It's probably as empty now as it was when we were last there. And if we go now, we'll probably be back before anyone even knows we're gone."

Fred's dubious expression spoke volumes, but he felt compelled to voice a prediction anyway.

"When Harry find out, he's going to hex me within an inch of my life."

TBC

Trying to remember to get this posted. It's also up -- complete at 28 chapters -- at Portkey.

Hope you are continuing to enjoy. You may leave a review on the way out, if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Twenty-Six: Preparation

The darkness was oppressive as Hermione and Fred crept up the gentle slope to the edge of the Little Hangleton graveyard. Shadowy blotches below made up what remained of the ruined town, and the tombstones shone a dull gray in the scant moonlight. Across the graveyard, looming above them, lurked the Riddle house, seeming to wait for them with malicious intent.

Nothing stirred, but Hermione felt the fine hairs on her arms prick. When they reached the edge of the wards and stopped, she gratefully took a deep breath, pressing her hands against the sides of her invisible abdomen. The slight incline was a lot more to negotiate when one was quite a bit heavier and one's center of gravity was off.

Fred noticed the gesture.

"Are you all right?" he asked solicitously, and she nodded. She saw the uncertainty dancing in his eyes, and knew that he was thinking they had made a mistake. She pursed her lips in determination.

I can do this, she thought to herself, and then, somehow the internal declaration became a plea to an unseen Power. If you let me do this, I promise I won't put another toe out of line until after Laurel is born. Her shoulders slumped slightly in chagrin. Her promise wouldn't mean a thing, she knew. Harry was going to be beyond furious when he discovered where they'd gone, no matter what they accomplished by going. And she wasn't so sure that they hadn't made a mistake in coming herself.

Fred made a sweeping gesture between her and the boundaries of the wards.

"You know what wards are up. You'd be faster taking 'em down than I would."

Hermione nodded again, as her eyebrows came down and together above her eyes, and she took on a distant expression of distinct concentration, all business. As she knelt, she was aware of Fred's

stance above her, balanced on the balls of his feet, wand out, watchful.

“So...how’d you get in last time?” Fred asked, in a casual whisper, as she began to work. His eyes remained on their surroundings.

“There’s a small cellar window around the east side of the house. It opens into some kind of forgotten storage room. Harry’s cell was just a few meters away.”

“And the house is warded?”

“Not much,” Hermione admitted. “It had been abandoned last time... when Ron and I were here. But most of the wards were here at the perimeter. It’s as if Voldemort isn’t really expecting anyone to even make it all the way to the house.”

“And the Repository Stones were inset into the floor of the cell? Were they warded at all?”

Hermione paused in her dismantling of the wards to cock her head curiously at Fred’s questions. He shrugged noncommittally.

“I just think we should get in and out of there as quickly as possible,” he said. “I might meet a girl after this is all over, and I fancy my bits intact.”

She regarded him almost suspiciously for a heartbeat longer, and then her lips curled upward into a smile, as she turned back to the task at hand.

“I’ve almost got it,” she said. “The Stones weren’t warded at all. It was fairly easy to pry them loose. Ron just used Accio. Of course, there’s always a possibility that that’s changed, especially if Death Eaters have been back, and attached any importance to the fact that a stone was missing.”

“I dunno,” Fred replied thoughtfully. “I think this place has been abandoned for good. At one time, Voldemort might have intended to

finish Harry off here, but now, I think he's got his sights set on Hogwarts."

Hermione tried not to let the finality of Fred's words sink in. She didn't know how long she'd known that the end would come at Hogwarts, but Fred's observation almost on the heels of Harry's comment that there was not much time left shook her to her core.

After another moment of silence, the last ward had been disabled, and Hermione struggled to her feet, her knees and back aching prodigiously.

"There," she said, unable to completely keep the satisfaction out of her tone. "We should be clear until we reach the house itself. Let's go."

"All right," Fred agreed, but there was an odd tone in his voice, and Hermione turned to look at him in concern.

"Fred? Is something – ?"

The abbreviated question was all she got out before she was hit with several spells in quick succession, cast with such rapidity that she was certain he'd been rehearsing the order in his head the entire time she was preparing for their entry.

She began to fall, the Body Bind rendering her limbs useless to keep her standing or catch herself, but Fred caught her neatly before she hit the ground, and laid her gently near the vast root network of an ancient tree. Her eyes were frozen wide in surprise and her mouth was locked shut, but she felt herself screaming inwardly.

Fred Weasley, what the hell do you think you're doing?

He had even cast Silencio to cover all his bases, even though she couldn't have spoken if her life had depended on it. Her wand was on the ground nearby, unreachable by her stiff, unmoving hands. She strained her eyes toward it, and saw only her faint outline, looking almost like a trick of the light in the blackness of the night that surrounded them. A Disillusionment charm blanketed her as well.

Fred hovered uncertainly over her, apology plain in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Hermione. I can’t let you go in there. I’ll go – I’ll get the repository stones and I’ll be right back. I suppose you can go on back to the cavern if you’d like. I’m sure you could get your medallion to take you there.”

She glared at him, because she couldn’t do anything else, but was unsure how much of the furious expression made it onto her mask-like face. Briefly, she considered transporting herself back, and making everyone think that she’d been attacked, but discarded it just as quickly. She’d still have to have left the sanctuary of the cave to be attacked, and Harry’s ire would still be swift and relentless.

I’m not going to leave you alone here, you great horse’s arse, she thought mutinously at Fred, even though she wasn’t sure what she could really do, other than make sure he came out again safely, and go to warn the Order if he did not return.

She saw him tap himself on his head with his wand, and with a trickling effect, he began to melt slowly out of sight. If she strained her eyes, she could see him moving gracefully and silently through the graveyard, darting in and out of the shadows of tombstones, all but impossible to follow. As he crossed the yard, and then truly disappeared from view, some of her seething annoyance was transmuted into worry and fear.

Please be careful.

Occasionally, a faint wind stirred the grasses around her and the leaves above her head. Their rustling was the only sound she heard for what seemed like quite some time. Adding the ghostly noises to the devastation of the adjoining town and the mere presence of the graveyard itself, Hermione felt more than a little ill at ease. She was grateful that Fred had at least pointed her in the general direction of the old manor house, and she focused all her attention that way, hoping with each passing second to see Fred’s wispy outline making its way down the slope to her.

She wasn't sure how long she'd been there, frozen into place beneath that tree, but it felt like eons. Her eyes ached from the effort of looking for something that was not there, and she found her focus drifting toward the skeletal remains of Little Hangleton.

Something flickered in the periphery of her vision, like distant lightning. Panicked, her attention returned toward the ancestral Riddle home, and she saw it again, unmistakable this time.

The flash of spellfire.

Panic began to dial itself upward within her, made all the more frenzied by her inability to move, to cast, to make herself heard. She could feel her mouth suddenly go completely dry, could feel the bands of helplessness constricting around her chest.

Fred! She cried out inwardly, furious and terrified. She strained unmoving fingers toward the wand that was tantalizingly, maddeningly just out of reach. More faint flickers of light teased around the edges of her vision. She thought she heard the subtle tinkle of shattering glass.

Accio Wand. Accio Wand!

And then, against all hope, the wand, a dark slender shape, slid gracefully into her hand.

Finite – she thought, but was distracted by a heavy, warm weight landing almost atop her, brought by the magic of his Order medallion.

“Sorry about that. You okay?” Fred’s welcome and familiar face peered down at her with concern. Over his shoulder, Hermione saw two dark figures detach themselves from the larger dark shadow that was the manor house, and begin systematically moving over the wide expanse of lawn.

There was not much time.

Finite Incantatem, she thought ferociously, and the network of spells ceased to function. She clambered to her feet, as quickly as she could, dislodging her surprised companion.

"They're looking for you. We've got to get out of here. Did you get them?" Her questions were short, urgent bursts of words. Fred held a small rucksack aloft, with a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Evidently someone was hoping we would try for them. But the simians they left in charge wouldn't be able to retrieve their wands from their arses if they were given directions. All the same, I suppose we'd better make..." he drew in a hissing breath, when he turned and the rucksack swung in an arc, hitting his other arm.

"You're hurt," Hermione whispered, in horrified realization.

"Just winged a bit," Fred said, pasting a smile over the obvious pain that lurked in his eyes.

"One of them evidently knew what a wand was," she retorted dryly, with concern in her eyes.

"Ah, but you fail to realize the full extent of my prowess," Fred said, tucking his injured arm protectively to his side, and wiggling his eyebrows at her. "There were four on guard inside, but only two came out to find me."

The Death Eaters had not seen them, were still searching, but had drawn closer to the far edge of the cemetery. Hermione linked her arm through Fred's good one, and, hoping to bring them back to the cavern as quietly and unobtrusively as possible, thought of Ron.

Soundlessly, they winked out of sight.

~*~*~*~*

Hermione found herself in a dim cubicle, instantly realizing that they had not appeared in the infirmary, as she had hoped. She took one step forward, and nearly fell, clenching her teeth in pain as she collided with the edge of a bed's frame.

“Where were you trying to end up exactly?” quipped Fred from the darkness near her elbow. As her eyes adjusted to her new surroundings, she recognized the unmade bed and the clothing haphazardly tossed in the general vicinity of the open trunk.

“Madam Pomfrey must have put Ron’s medallion in here with his clothes,” she muttered, reaching down to rub at her throbbing shin with one hand. “How’s your arm?”

“It hurts,” Fred admitted, “but it’s only as much as I deserve. Shouldn’t have let him get a shot off. I must admit I wouldn’t mind having – oy, what goes on?” He had stopped in mid-sentence, indicating with an inclination of his chin that the cavern had become bathed in brilliant light. For the first time, Hermione was aware of a frantic babbling of many voices.

Then she heard Harry’s voice over everyone else’s, impatient, angry, and fraught with worry.

“Where the hell is she?”

Hermione’s eyes slid shut, as she realized that the moment of reckoning had already come, and apparently, that it wanted a large audience as well. She and Fred exchanged glances, and moved silently through the partition that delineated Ron’s living quarters.

“I’m right here, Harry.” She deliberately kept her voice even and calm. The War Room was jammed with people, packed into knots, talking in low, urgent tones, chaos brimming just under the surface, but Harry heard her. He jumped and turned in response, as if he’d just been hexed. His eyes flicked from her to Fred, to the divider through which they’d just crossed.

“We already looked – where have you been?” he said, the concern in his tone giving way to something more irate.

“Fred and I – we had an idea... we just went to – ” she began.

"You left the cavern?" Her husband sounded incredulous. "Without telling anyone? Where did you go? What if something had happened?" His gaze drifted down to her abdomen, still magically rendered invisible, and she saw a muscle clench in his jaw.

"No worries, Harry," Fred said jovially, though Hermione could not help but notice the strain in his voice or his pallor. He held up the sack, so that the bulging of the contents could be easily seen. "We've just been up to Tom's place, acquiring something that belonged to you."

There was a beat of silence as the Order digested this, and Hermione was able to pinpoint the exact second that Harry realized just what Fred meant by his phrase "Tom's place."

"Sweet Merlin, Hermione, how could you?" he bellowed. "Do you have any idea what could have – do you stop and think at all before you go – " He sputtered into fuming silence, his anger evidently hindering his ability to be coherent.

She blinked at him apologetically, unsure of what to say. She knew that what she had done was very nearly unpardonable, but –as they'd been successful in their task – didn't the end justify the means? Even so, she couldn't really fault Harry for being upset and angry, and knew that it was his love for her and for Laurel that made him react that way.

"We – we've gotten the Repository Stones, Harry," she finally said, her voice coming out rather low and breathless, trembling with the anticipation. "We – we think we can get it back – all of it..." She flung a glance at Fred for confirmation.

"It was your wife's idea," Fred acknowledged. "Brilliant, that one is."

"Get what back?" Harry asked, in a somewhat more civilized tone. Curiosity seemed to have momentarily won out over anger, though Hermione could tell from his eyes that this was far from resolved.

“Your mag – ” Hermione began to reply, but was cut off when Fred suddenly collapsed beside her, his limbs folding noiselessly beneath him. His face was white as chalk.

“Fred!” Mr. Weasley’s voice broke through the others, as members of the Order converged on the wounded.

“He’s probably in shock,” Hermione said, as Fred was Levitated toward the infirmary. “I didn’t – he was – it’s his arm,” she supplied, as Madam Pomfrey approached rapidly. “He was playing it off. I – I didn’t think it was severe...” she trailed off, aghast at her own thoughtlessness.

Madam Pomfrey neatly sliced the sleeve from his shirt, and Hermione gasped at the sight of the wound, ugly and quickly growing putrid. She recognized it instantly.

“Is – is that – ?” Fleur’s voice could barely be heard, faint with horror. Hermione could hear Ginny, demanding frantically from the back of the crowd to know what was going on. Hermione dimly registered Cho and Padma moving to flank Ginny, and apprise her of the situation.

“Will he – can you – Percy...” Mr. Weasley stammered unevenly, taking up a place near Fred’s bedside from which he would not be dislodged. Ginny was quickly guided to a place beside her father. Hermione looked over her shoulder toward the far end of the infirmary, where Ron lay sleeping, and felt fresh guilt wallop her over the head. Harry was standing nearby, but he was not looking at her, and the rigidity of his stance was as impenetrable as a stone barricade.

“We already know there’s no anti-jinx for this particular spell,” Madam Pomfrey said softly. “If left to itself, the Carioso will spread just as it did with Percy.”

Mr. Weasley’s face sagged, and seemed to age as Hermione watched. How much more? she felt the silent cry in her soul, even as her pulse thrummed out the rhythm, my fault, my fault, my fault.

“However,” the mediwitch continued, “the placement of the curse is fortunate. We may yet be able to save him.”

Several of the Order members standing a few paces away, near the dividers, stared at Madam Pomfrey with mingled curiosity and incomprehension. Mr. Weasley’s eyes were bright with tears, but he nodded with resignation.

“You’ll have to remove his arm.”

There was a muffled cry of dissent from Ginny, and Hermione felt her chest tighten to the point where she could barely breathe. Her eyes stung mercilessly. Mr. Weasley patted his daughter’s arm mechanically, with a there, there gesture.

“Better his arm than his life, Ginevra,” he told her soothingly, but something bleak and sorrowful remained in his face.

“All of them – ” she choked, gesturing despondently in the direction where she knew Ron’s bed lay. She couldn’t complete her thought, but Mr. Weasley seemed to know what she meant, for he pressed a kiss to the top of her vivid head, and murmured,

“I know, sweetheart.”

Hermione knew too – knew that the Weasley family, being so much larger, had had so much more to lose, and it seemed that the strong and jovial sons in particular had been cruelly targeted. And Ginny too, Hermione thought, even though she knew that Ginny had not been thinking of herself.

Hermione’s eyes dropped again to Fred’s too-still form in the infirmary bed, the quietly efficient figures of Madam Pomfrey and Penelope hunched over him. My fault, my fault, my fault.

“Everyone will need to clear out of here,” Madam Pomfrey said, in a tone that brooked no opposition. “The more quickly I perform the surgery, the more of his arm I may be able to save.”

There was a rustle of movement as people began to exit the infirmary. Hermione heard Professor McGonagall say softly,

“Poppy, can you...?”

“There isn’t much choice now, is there?” was Madam Pomfrey’s resolved reply.

Hermione’s arm had gone out to clutch at Harry’s sleeve before she’d even registered the movement. The eyes he turned to her were distant and impersonal.

“Harry, please...” she managed to say before her throat swelled shut over the words. He parted his lips as if to speak, and then appeared to reconsider, his gaze flickering over the people trickling past them in twos and threes.

“Let’s go somewhere where we can talk,” he said in a stony voice.

She swept the Weasley bedside with one last sorrowful glance, and was surprised to see that family’s patriarch watching them both. She half-expected to see some lurking recrimination in Arthur Weasley’s gaze, but did not. He quirked one cheekbone up in an effort at a reassuring half-smile, but the gesture was quickly forgotten at Harry’s implacable expression.

My fault, my fault, my fault.

~*~*~*~*

“Harry, I know you’re angry...” Hermione began, all but trotting alongside him, as his strides, lengthened by emotion, carried him across the cavern toward the living quarters.

“Damn right I’m angry,” he replied in clipped tones. “You used to take me to task for flying by the seat of my pants, and here you are doing the very same thing. Only worse, because you have so much more to lose. You’re not just putting yourself in danger anymore, Hermione.”

"I know that, Harry. But the Riddle manor had been abandoned. There was no reason to suspect any danger in – "

"No reason? No reason to expect any danger from Lord Voldemort's bloody house?" Harry jammed both hands through his dark hair, simultaneously furious and terrified. "If you had said something – there could have been a small squadron of Order members sent to retrieve anything you wanted from that place!"

"I didn't think – "

"That's right, you didn't think. Cerebral Hermione, always so sure that she can logic her way out of any situation that presents itself. Logic is pretty worthless when you're staring down the business end of a Death Eater's wand. You're damned lucky that you didn't end up just like Fred."

"I didn't go in," she admitted hoarsely, as there came a break in Harry's tirade. "He – Fred wouldn't let me go in. He hexed me out in the graveyard; he went in alone." Her voice was mechanical, her gaze far away, as she relived the long, terrifying moments of helplessness and incapacitation at the base of that tree. "It was my fault – " she blurted suddenly, returning tortured eyes to Harry's face. "If I'd gone in with him – or – or if I'd – if I'd alerted the Order, he wouldn't have been – and now he's going to be handicapped...if he even survives." The rigid muscles in her body went slack so suddenly that Harry took an involuntary half-step toward her, thinking that she would fall. "Ron and – and now Fred...all to save me? And now they – that's two who can't stand with you at the end – can't fight. I'm not – I'm not worth the cost."

Harry's hand closed around her arm, just above her elbow, and drew her toward him. She could feel his breath warm on her face, feel the fringe of his bangs brush her hairline.

"You're worth very much," he whispered. "And I'd really appreciate it if you'd remember that once in awhile."

"I didn't think I'd endanger the baby," she murmured, her gaze sinking to her shoes. "I just – I just wanted to help."

“You’ll help me most by living. Do you think I could survive without you?”

“Of course you could, Harry.”

“I wouldn’t want to.”

They stared at each other for a long moment, the plethora of emotions swirling around inside both of them, too plentiful and conflicting to properly analyze – anger, fear, love, shame, sorrow, desperation – all writhing together in a confusing cacophony.

The knapsack that Fred had dropped caught the periphery of Hermione’s vision, and she turned to pick it up, without really thinking about it. Harry’s gaze dropped to consider the tattered brown leather.

“Are those really – ?” he began, trying to sound clinical and disinterested.

“Fred said he got all of them,” Hermione replied, lifting the flap to peer inside. The interior of the sack was weighted down with a jumble of greenly-tinged crystals.

“And how are they going to get my magic back?” he spoke the question tentatively, as if he tried not to attach too much credence to the theory, so as to refrain from lifting his hopes prematurely.

“Harry, we – that is, Fred and I think that your magic is still in there.”

“Where?” he asked, before looking at the Stones again, with comprehension dawning in his eyes. “In the Stones? He – he didn’t – ? ”

Hermione shook her head, looking somber.

“They had served their purpose,” she said. “He had stripped you of everything that made you a threat to him, had gloried in your humiliation and defeat. To him, he is the most powerful wizard in the world. Why would it occur to him to use your magic, to regard it as

anything other than garbage? We scared him when one was stolen – although he probably couldn't know for sure who had taken it. He set up a guard, but again – ” she shrugged her shoulders. “His own arrogance is his undoing.”

“So with my – my full capacity of magic returned, d'you think I'll be able to – to win?” he asked delicately.

She turned to fully face him again, her eyes brimming with confidence and love.

“I think you'll be able to defeat him, Harry,” and she quickly outlined the idea she and Fred had conceived, using *Priori Incantatem* from the brother wand to separate Voldemort from his magic.

She saw something unfamiliar flash into his face, and realized that it was lurking hope, finally morphing itself into a vision of freedom, of a life after Voldemort for which he'd hardly dared dream. He opened his mouth to say something, but never got the words out.

“Oy, Harry! He's going!” Seamus suddenly shouted from the War Room, where he and Blaise were keeping watch over the Marauder's Map.

Whatever Harry had been going to say vanished into the ether, as his face became suddenly hard and business-like and determined. He maneuvered between the disorderly clumps of chairs, still hanging on to Hermione, planting his other hand on the table's surface, and leaning over the Map for a closer look.

“What's going on?” Hermione asked.

“Neville's clone is taking out the Primes. He'd informed us that he was starting; that's when Seamus woke everybody up.” Hermione's eyes widened in comprehension, as she realized her assumption that he had roused the cavern because he couldn't find her had been erroneous. She hunched next to him, almost breathless with tension, as Neville's spidery faint name moved out from a tapestry to confront a darkly-inked Ambrosius Weatherford. She didn't even register how tightly she was squeezing Harry's hand, until Weatherford's name

faded from existence, dispersing into more and more minute particles of ink, until it was completely gone.

“Look!” came the hoarse exclamation from Blaise, as he pointed to the staircase of the Astronomy Tower. Another incarnation of Ambrosius Weatherford had also vanished. And then another... and another... By the time, the cascade of disappearances had stopped, six names had vanished from the castle layout. And who knows how many more elsewhere? Hermione thought.

Neville’s name paused briefly in that corridor – and Hermione began to wonder what would happen to the multiples corpses – and ducked into another hidden corridor, moving to his next target.

“If you’ve – ” Hermione began, but had to swallow in order to get her dry throat to continue. “If you’ve ordered Neville’s clone to take out the Primes, then – then when – when do you expect to – ?” She couldn’t finish, but didn’t really need to.

“In two days. Blaise has been calling up the recruits,” Harry replied, knowing what she did not ask. His face was set like flint.

On the Map, Quintus MacDougall became nine sudden blooms of rapidly diminishing flecks of ink.

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Eighteen hours later found Hermione hunched over a cluttered worktable in Fred’s lab. Harry sat on a nearby stool, his loose posture belying the cat-like alertness in his green eyes, which did not leave the form of his wife. She was closely examining one of the crystals, which was now a dull whitish grey, like the color of dirty dishwater. She picked up her wand, twiddled it nervously between her fingers, and then looked up, turning to Harry with a look of finality on her face, as she tucked a wayward strand of hair behind one ear.

“Okay,” she said, resolutely. “I think we’re ready.”

She held up her wand and murmured a spell under her breath. The wood moved in the air, almost as if by its own volition, and a shining

intricate swirl formed itself out of glowing light. Harry was reminded of the one he'd seen in the ramshackle cottage on the Scottish coast.

"There it is," she breathed. "Your magical signature. Still contained within these Repository Stones."

"Is it – is it still functional?" he managed to say.

"By definition, Repository Stones are for storage, not destruction. I'm not sure this has ever been done before in the history of wizard-kind, but – but your magic should be intact."

"So...what happens now?" he asked; his eyes did not leave the small stack of remaining green stones.

"Well, I've got to make sure that vial's signature is close to yours – it's really the closest way we have to verify that it actually belonged to Voldemort. Then I've just got to extract your magic from each Stone, and return – return it to you."

There was a beat of silence, as if neither of them could contemplate that it could actually be so easy.

Hermione cleared her throat uncomfortably, and picked up the vial, which felt unnaturally cold to the touch. The roiling mist seemed to intensify its movement, as if in defiance. She created an impenetrable field before placing the vial within it, and using her wand to remove the seal.

She sucked in air between her teeth, and darted an involuntary look at Harry, as the fog lurched outward to cover the inner surface area of the field, turning the hovering sphere iron grey, as it searched for an escape route. But her spell held, and the essence that had once occupied Harry's mind returned to the center of the sphere, to huddle in a pulsing and sullen ball of malicious energy.

"Call Professor McGonagall," Hermione whispered urgently.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Harry spoke to her, but his eyes remained transfixed on that which had once been the Circle.

“No...no, but – but if it gets loose... Please, I need someone to ensure the blocking spell holds, while I remove the signature for examination.” She looked up to see that her husband had apparently heard nothing she said. “Harry, please.”

The emotional intensity in her voice seemed to jolt him from his reverie, and he staggered clumsily up from the lab stool on which he’d been sitting, nearly knocking it over.

“Right,” he said, in a low, rough voice. “I’ll be right back.”

When he did return with Professor McGonagall, he was more like himself, and did not look at Hermione’s sphere again, for which she was grateful. She was also thankful for the solid and immutable presence of their Head of House, who generally seemed unflappable, even in the direst of circumstances. Hermione found that it unfailingly gave her great comfort.

The professor trained her wand on the sphere, and nodded at Hermione, when she was ready. The younger witch carefully slid the end of her wand through the translucent barrier, and began using a gentle fishing motion, similar to the one she and Fred used to discern the individual ingredients of potions.

The grey essence of the Circle surged in one incredibly rapid, flowing movement toward the spot where the field had been breached by Hermione’s wand, and she distantly heard Harry emit a muffled cry of alarm. But McGonagall was quicker, throwing what was essentially a magical patch over the spot as the last of the glowing strand had been pulled through.

Hermione directed the signature over to where Harry’s still hovered, and found that her hands were slickly wet against her wand, and that her heart was pounding a terrified staccato within her chest.

“Thank you so much, Professor,” she said breathlessly, as McGonagall efficiently forced the essence back into the vial, sealed it, and dispersed the barrier field.

“Holy hell,” Harry breathed, moving past her to more closely examine the two magical signatures rotating serenely in midair. “Can you believe that?”

Indeed, the strands were very much alike, differing in only a few minor details. One segment of Harry’s spiraled in one direction, while the corresponding segment of Voldemort’s dog-legged in another. Harry’s shone a brilliant green, while Voldemort’s had a sickly reddish gleam.

“This must be his,” Hermione finally said, and flicking her wand at a blank sheet of parchment, directed the two signatures to inscribe themselves in ink for posterity. When they had finished, she put the strand belonging to Voldemort into the empty Repository stone, which began to glow a dull and lurid red, and pulled Harry’s signature into the tip of her wand, which effervesced slightly before subsiding.

“So, what happens now?” Harry’s gaze was fixated on her, and she knew that he understood what would happen next, but needed to hear her say it. She forced trembling lips upward into a smile, although, somehow this time seemed too momentous for smiles, and gestured toward him with her wand.

“Now you get your magic back,” she said.

“It’d be a sight faster, if we alternated, wouldn’t it? That way one person could extract, while the other returned Harry’s magic,” came a voice from the lab’s entrance, causing both of them to look up in astonishment.

“Mr. Weasley!” Professor McGonagall said, in the tone of motherly remonstrance that they had all become familiar with. He offered her a cheeky smile.

“Fred, are you sure you’re up to it?” Hermione asked, in a hushed apologetic tone.

“It’s good to see you up and about, mate,” Harry said more jovially, though his eyes were serious.

“Hey, it’s not like it’s my wand hand, right?” the remaining Weasley twin said, shrugging both shoulders and indicating the empty space where his elbow joint and forearm had once been. “Madam Pomfrey’s going to work on a magical arm for me. Wouldn’t George have had loads of jokes about this?”

Harry and Hermione looked stricken, but Fred smiled a little. McGonagall’s eyes were warm and proud.

“Let me help,” he said earnestly. “I can do this, honestly.”

Hermione didn’t see how she could possibly refuse him, and she drew in a deep, uneven breath, before gesturing to the stool adjacent to hers.

“You know which spell to use?” she asked, and Fred nodded. “It’ll store in your wand-tip for a while; just don’t cast any spells until you transfer it to Harry.” Fred touched his wand to his temple in a jaunty salute.

“Right-o, boss,” he replied. His smile was as open and genuine as Hermione had ever seen from him, and yet she could not help the guilt that thrashed mercilessly within her. He must have seen some of it shadowing her eyes, for he nudged her teasingly in the side and said, “Hey, don’t fret about it. The arm was given in a worthy cause, and I don’t begrudge the loss. Now,” he added, as Hermione’s eyes filled, “let’s get a move on, shall we?”

She nodded, and took another steadying breath, as she rotated on the stool toward her husband, who sat up straighter in expectation. Aiming her wand at him, she informed Harry apologetically,

“This may hurt a bit.”

Harry straightened his shoulders and closed his eyes, as he muttered,

“It’ll be worth it.”

Hermione felt the strong desire to close her eyes as well, but forced herself to train her gaze solely on Harry.

“Recipero,” she said, and nearly lost her grip on her wand, as it twisted in her grasp, recoiling backward with the force of the magic issuing from it. She moved her other hand up for support, and held on tightly.

A green stream of light, eerily like the Avada Kedavra, spewed from her wand-tip with a white-noise accompaniment, and hit Harry squarely in the chest. But where a normal spell would dissipate, this jet continued, the greenness diffusing throughout Harry, and causing him to glimmer slightly in the dim light. His head was thrown back, his teeth bared in a grimace, and his chest heaving, as he clearly fought the desire to cry out in pain. One hand flew out, searching for purchase on the edge of the lab table, and three or four potions beakers fell from its surface and shattered. Magic seemed to crackle ominously around them, and her own heartbeat roared in her ears.

Hermione struggled to maintain her two-handed grip on her wand, her eyes fixed on her husband, and her teeth clamped down painfully on her lower lip. Professor McGonagall Reparoed the mess of destroyed beakers, and moved behind Harry, bracing him with a spell so that he would not collapse onto the floor. She nodded at Hermione to keep going, and she could read in the older woman's determined expression that she was not to stop, no matter what.

Finally the spell trailed off into a puff of green steam, and Harry relaxed, as Hermione lowered her wand.

“Oh, God, Harry, are you all right?” she asked, moving toward him, but afraid to touch him. His spine hooked forward like a whiplash, throwing him from his arched position to one where he hunched over his knees, breathing heavily, and Hermione saw sweat dripping from the damp strands of his hair. She hadn't known it was going to be so bad, and she trembled at the thought that perhaps it had been like this when he'd lost the magic too.

“I'm...okay,” he said, with difficulty, removing his glasses from his damp face, and placing them carefully out of harm's way on the back of the table.

“Good,” Fred replied seriously, holding his own wand aloft. “Because I’m ready.”

“Maybe we should give him a little time between rounds...to recover,” Hermione blurted, still looking anxiously at Harry.

“There’s no time,” Fred and Harry said in unison.

“It’s not that bad, Hermione, really,” Harry added, his reassurances somewhat belied by his panting. “It – it’s not incapacitating me, it just hurts.”

“I think we’re all agreed here about the hazards of prolonged exposure to pain,” Hermione replied icily.

“Hermione, in a perfect world, I’d agree with you,” Fred interposed. “But Harry’s got to get his magic, adjust to having it again as much as he can, and maybe get a partial night of sleep before it’s time for us to go.”

“Fred, you can’t mean to go,” Hermione said in surprise, fixating on the plural pronoun.

“Like hell I can’t,” he returned reasonably. “There are already too many of us out of commission. Anyway, there’s really not much time left.”

Hermione wondered at his certainty, and saw Harry turn questioning eyes on Fred as well. The redhead darted his eyes toward the War Room before replying,

“They’re onto Neville. The Death Eaters don’t know who it is, but they’re tearing the castle apart looking for him.”

Harry did not look surprised, and Hermione found herself glancing wildly between the two men. Professor McGonagall looked grim.

“Well, why aren’t we helping him?” Hermione asked. “If they know – if they’re after him...why – why isn’t he coming back here?”

“You know it’s too big of a risk, Hermione, especially with them in pursuit; he’d lead them straight to us. ‘Swwhy he didn’t have a medallion.”

“But – but he –” She had trouble fathoming how they could sit and talk about it so detachedly.

“He knew this was likely a one-way trip when he volunteered,” Harry said tiredly. “He gave himself up to give the real Neville a chance – and to make up for what he nearly did to the Order. It’s possible he could lose the pursuit and make it out of the castle, but...”

“But the passageway – the stationary Portkey? There’s a medallion there, waiting for him.”

“The Death Eaters know the Portkey’s there,” Harry reminded her. “We don’t need them prowling around the woods hunting for Neville, when we’re on the verge of staging a battle from that direction. And Neville’s clone knows that, Hermione. If he can shake them off long enough, then maybe...”

Hermione clasped one hand across her mouth, and sat motionless on her stool, trying to imagine lovable, bumbling Neville – even a clone – being chased by legions of Death Eaters, wondering how they would make him pay for what he’d done to them. She was startled out of her reverie by Harry’s gentle hand on her shoulder.

“We don’t have a lot of time, Hermione. Right now, all Voldemort’s resources are focused on finding the killer in their midst. We have to strike before he begins replenishing his numbers.”

“Right,” she said woodenly, and she felt his fingers linger gently before moving away. She turned back toward the workbench, and began to work on the next Stone. At the edge of her vision, she saw the green glow commence, and heard the grind of wood against stone floor, as Harry must have gone rigid, shifting the stool upon which he sat.

A strangled groan came from between his teeth, and Fred said,

“Easy there, Harry. Almost done.”

The Repository Stone dulled before her eyes as the magic leached slowly from it. Fred was lowering his wand, while Harry seemed to be in an upright position, only because of the aid of their professor. Hermione sighed deeply, and turned to face them.

“I’m ready,” she said quietly.

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When Fred and Hermione had finally emptied the last of the Repository Stones and restored the full count of Harry’s magic, they exited the lab together. Harry’s clothing and hair were plastered to him with sweat, and he was walking with difficulty. They caught the attention of most of the Order, who looked at them with questioning, expectant gazes. Harry staggered sideways, and flung his arm outward to catch a nearby divider for support.

It burst into furious flames, and collapsed into a pile of ashes before Padma’s quickly cast Aguamenti spell could even touch it.

“Damn, Harry,” Seamus responded, with a low whistle.

Hermione eyed him anxiously, as Harry appeared to be largely embarrassed and flustered by his loss of control.

“Yeah,” Harry replied with a tight smile. “I’m going to do the Order a whole hell of a lot of good like this.”

“Harry, it’s okay. You’re just – you’re just not used to having this much magic at your disposal. It’s like being eleven again; you’ll relearn it quickly. Plus, you’ve just been through a lot. You’ll need a Calming Draught, and probably some sleep. You’ve still got a little time to adjust,” Hermione rushed to reassure him, hating to see his discouragement reassert itself.

“How’s Neville?” Harry asked tersely, not differentiating. Everyone knew who he meant.

“He’s still free,” the original Neville Longbottom said, somewhat ironically. “They know someone’s in the castle, but so far, they haven’t been able to find him. He’s learned those passages well. He must have been Vanishing the bodies, but I guess there are just too many gone now.”

“How many?”

“Two hundred eleven,” was the astonishing number Neville gave. Harry nodded, and turned to Seamus and Blaise, who had virtually become his right-hand, especially given Ron’s injury and Lupin’s grief.

“And those you’ve contacted?” he asked, referring to the wizards and witches that had been recruited to their cause, most of them from the supply cooperative they’d formed.

“They’re on alert,” Seamus answered. “They know that it’s happening soon, and they’re standing by until we notify them with the medallions. We haven’t given them any coordinates yet...just to be safe.” The newer Order members – ones who did not reside in the cavern that was its heart – had been subjected to every kind of truth-divining and integrity-ensuring spell or potion or hex that they could think of. And even then, there remained the unspoken, but all too real fear that somehow someone would betray them.

“Give me a couple of hours to sleep this off,” Harry told them, as Hermione interrupted.

“You need six.”

“I’ll take three,” he bargained quickly, the implacable look on his face assuring her that she’d not get more than that. “Send word to everyone in two. Take the invisibility cloak and scout out the tunnel...make sure no Death Eaters are anywhere near it when we’re ready to go.”

Hermione threaded her arm through Harry’s, as they made their way to the infirmary for the Calming Draught; her mind was whirling. She tried not to think about the fact that she’d be left behind, and clung to

the hope that their idea would work, and that Harry would return to her and Laurel unscathed.

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Harry's chest moved up and down rhythmically beneath Hermione's temple, as he breathed in sleep. She could not sleep, and had made no attempt to do so, even if Laurel's cumbersome presence would not have made it difficult. There were things she could be doing, maybe even things she should be doing, but she would not give up these last moments with Harry.

She knew that their odds were long; even with their additions and the Death Eaters losses – thanks to Neville's clone – they still remained far eclipsed in number. Add to that, the Order members who could not fight – herself, Ginny, Ron, and Fleur with baby William – and the numbers shrank further.

Part of her would stay saddened that, to reach this pivotal final moment, Harry would have to go on alone. Neither she nor Ron would accompany him to the end. I always thought I'd go, she thought, not for the first time.

Laurel kicked at her ribs enthusiastically, and Hermione winced and shifted. Her movement roused Harry, who moved his hand up her back, and pressed a kiss into her hair.

"Did you sleep?" he mumbled, still sounding halfway there himself.

"No, did you?"

"Hard to believe, but I actually did. Had a nice dream too – about a little stone cottage and me and you – and a little girl with red hair."

"Red hair? Really?" Hermione was both amused and delighted that Harry's dream had Laurel looking like Lily. They snuggled in silence for a long moment, as the noise outside in the cavern proper picked up pace. Neither of them said anything, but they both noticed it, and knew what it meant.

“Hermione,” Harry said, propping up on one elbow, and taking both of her hands in his. Hermione noticed absently that the slightly irregular skin present on both of their hands was hardly visible in the low light. “I want you to promise me that you’ll stay safe – that you’ll not come unless you’re absolutely sure that there’s no danger. Your first duty is to Laurel – promise me.” Hermione nodded mutely, unable to say anything around the large lump that swelled in her throat. “If the battle is lost – ”

“Harry, no...” Hermione interrupted. She did not want to hear it.

“If the battle is lost,” he repeated steadily, his eyes boring into hers. “Take the other Order members who are staying here, and get out of England... do you understand?”

“We can’t just leave!” Hermione was incensed; she couldn’t imagine just cutting and running, leaving who knows how many magical folk within Voldemort’s iron fisted rule.

“If I – if – something happens, then – then I’ll not have you dying for something that cannot be won... not when you have Laurel to think of. She’s too important; remember Luna’s prophecy? Promise me.”

Hermione nodded shakily by way of response.

“I promise.” Her voice was the barest of whispers. “But you have to do something for me too.”

Harry arched his eyebrows questioningly at her, prompting her to continue.

“Take my wand with you.”

“No.”

“Harry!”

“No! Absolutely not. I am not going to leave you here with no way to protect yourself.”

"I've thought about this, Harry. Your wand has a connection to Voldemort's. He'll be expecting that, and if he thinks that you no longer have your wand, that you are using another, so much the better. He won't even know what hit him, when you bring out your wand and use Priori Incantatem. Duel with my wand, but deal Voldemort his death blow with yours."

"But what will you – ?"

"I'll be here, in this highly warded cavern beneath a lake." She reached out to brush the angle of his cheekbone with the tips of her fingers. "Waiting for you."

"Will I be able to use your wand as well as I could mine?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied, her eyes going distant. "Remus and I talked about it once. When we were in the forest, the day of the Circle – I used your wand, as well as if it had been my own. It was just a while later that I found out I was pregnant. Not quite a Wand Bond, but near enough to it. We're connected, Harry."

Harry's gaze grew soft as he reached for her, and kissed her gently on the lips, an easy kiss that became almost desperately passionate.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"I love you too." She reached over to the side table, and pressed the smooth length of her wand into his hand. He still looked as if he wanted to argue with her, but he said only,

"I'll bring it right back."

"See that you do," she replied, the words meant to be light-hearted, but her trembling voice gave the true emotions away.

~*~*~*~*

When Harry and Hermione exited into the cavern, Blaise was just returning from the tunnel, reporting no Death Eater activity in the vicinity. Fred brought Harry his wand, with the empty and waiting

Repository Stones shrunk and inserted into the wand-tip. Harry took a long look at the altered wand, and tucked it safely into his robes.

“Are we ready?” Seamus asked, as Harry took a few practice shots with Hermione’s wand. After a false start or two, it seemed to be performing quite efficiently.

“I reckon so,” Harry answered, exchanging meaningful looks with his wife. For a moment, nobody spoke, and Hermione’s eyes tripped over the other Order members. Professors Lupin and McGonagall, and Mr. Weasley were standing with the fighters, which including the whole of Seamus and Blaise’s team. Fred was pale, but standing firm, with a determined look masking his merry face, and one sleeve of his robes billowy with a Cushioning charm, protecting the newly healed stump. Ginny stood next to Fleur, who cradled a sleeping William; both of them wore the stoic, rigid expressions that Hermione felt sure resided on her own face as well. Penelope was going with them; while Madam Pomfrey would stay to care for Ron.

Almost with one synchronized movement, the team removed their medallions, and let them fall. They would instead be using preset Portkeys equipped with the voice activation that Hermione had devised, which would take them each to a different location where password-activated medallions were camouflaged and waiting. Harry was determined that the Death Eaters would have no way of finding out about the cavern.

As the metal disks hit the stone floor, Hermione felt like her heart was seizing up with each resounding ping. And then, there was a flurry of sudden movement: Seamus’ team was huddled in a tight ring, arms intertwined, as Blaise spoke intently to them, and Padma motioned for Luna to join them; Professor McGonagall and Penelope converged on Madam Pomfrey, embracing her tightly; Fred and Mr. Weasley kissed baby William’s cheeks – having apparently already said their good-byes to Ron in the infirmary; and Neville surprised everyone, including Ginny, by kissing her fiercely.

Hermione locked eyes with Harry, but they did not move toward each other, did not speak, did not touch. She clasped her hands around her swollen abdomen, her message clear: Come back to us.

She heard his voice in her mind, like she had at that other battle of Hogwarts, that distant day when she thought she'd lost him forever, and she prayed that this fight would not end as that one had.

I love you, he said.

I know.

Blaise moved out into the water, going as an advanced scout one last time, to make sure the area where they would gather was clear. He had just cast his Bubble-head charm and disappeared beneath the murky water, a scuffling movement drew everyone's attention to the infirmary entrance.

Ron was standing in the doorway, his face an ashy grayish-white, leaning heavily on the support post. Hermione wondered absently if he'd always looked so thin.

"Mr. Weasley!" Madam Pomfrey said, with an air of high dudgeon. "What in Merlin's name are you doing out of bed?"

Ron did not answer her, but began moving unevenly towards the group.

Harry and Hermione met him halfway, and three hands clasped.

"Ron!" Hermione exclaimed, gladness plain in her voice.

"Couldn't let you go without saying good-bye," Ron said thickly, his eyes initially on Harry, but moving to encompass his brother and father, as they joined the small knot. "I'm sorry I can't – I can't go – "

"We'll be okay, Ron," Harry reassured him. "You just take care of yourself – and make sure Hermione looks after herself, would you?"

Hermione managed to look at them with fond indignation, but Ron's eyes were very serious.

"Absolutely, mate – but – but only until you get back."

"Of course," Harry said agreeably, as if his return were a foregone conclusion.

Ron turned to Fred, and shook his hand with as much heartiness as he could muster, and said, "Kick some Death Eater arse for me – and for George too – and –"

"We'll do it for all of them," Fred answered. "Weasley banner flying high, and all that."

There was a muffled splash as Blaise reappeared and staggered, dripping, back into their midst.

"Still clear," he informed them, and Hermione took a deep breath into lungs that suddenly seemed to be constricting. Arthur Weasley took his youngest son into a tight embrace, and something that Fred whispered to Ginny made her half-laugh, half-sob.

There was ponderous silence as everyone took in what was about to happen, and Hermione saw Lupin's eyes flit over toward the rocky wall behind which Tonks lay. One by one, the fighting Order members moved toward the lake, and began to duck beneath the gentle waves that lapped at the cavern floor, the light glinting briefly off the shining surface of their Bubble-head charms. Harry walked backwards until the lake was at his waist, refusing to take his eyes off of Hermione until the last possible moment.

Finally, he turned away, as if being physically forced to against his will, cast his own charm, and was gone.

Hermione felt all the air leave her lungs with a whoosh, and tears pricked the backs of her eyelids, though she refused to let herself cry. Ginny sagged against Fleur, who wordlessly wrapped the arm that was not holding her son around her sister-in-law. Ron was terrifyingly pale, and remained motionless, staring with remote eyes at the

shallows of the lake, and Hermione knew that he was wishing with everything he had that he was with them. Madam Pomfrey watched him, her lips pressed tightly together with sympathy, and went to his side, tucking her shoulder beneath his to bolster him and escort him back to the infirmary. He swore briefly, but did not fight the mediwitch, and Hermione watched him go, knowing exactly what he was feeling.

As her eyes drifted aimlessly around the too-empty, too-large cavern, she noted the now vacant War Room, with the Map half-furled on the central table.

"The Map!" she shrieked suddenly and without preamble. "We can see what's going on!" She added in response to Fleur and Ginny's questioning faces, and the three of them rushed eagerly over to the parchment.

None of the Order had arrived yet, and Hermione figured that it might be a few more minutes, while everyone was organized and deployed. Hogwarts was in an uproar though, as clusters of Death Eaters roamed the corridors like stirred-up ants, apparently still on the lookout for Neville's clone, who – by the looks of things – had managed to take out a few more Primes even while being pursued.

Hermione finally spotted his name, and realized with shock that, whatever the patrolling Death Eaters were doing, it was not looking for Neville, as the spidery faint script of his name now resided in the Headmaster's office, surrounding by the chief amongst the Death Eaters and Voldemort himself.

"Oh no!" she gasped, and watched Fleur's eyes follow her own and darken.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, her wide eyes flickering back and forth sightlessly.

"Voldemort has Neville's clone," Fleur informed her, looking grim.

The other dots began to sporadically converge on Neville, sometimes all but obscuring him from the Map completely, and the ink that denoted his name began to flicker.

“What are they doing to him?” Fleur asked, sounding despairingly outraged. Hermione exchanged helpless glances with the Frenchwoman, as they watched transfixed, horrified. There was nothing they could do.

And then it happened. Neville Longbottom burst apart into miniscule ink particles that faded away, as if it had never been, even as Harry’s team popped into sight in the dungeons of Hogwarts, a darkly-inked Neville among them.

“He’s gone,” Hermione said dully, unable to believe that they had been a distant audience to someone’s death. The Order was moving carefully through the dungeons; the nearest Death Eaters moved about inside Slytherin’s common room.

“He was very brave,” Fleur said. “Who knows what would have happened if he had not taken out all those clones?” Ginny said nothing, but sniffed audibly. There was a moment of silence, broken when Fleur exclaimed, “What on earth is that?”

Hermione had been distracted watching Harry’s dot prowl through the corridor, and had to crane her neck to see to what Fleur referred.

Ink was dripping down the blank space at the bottom of the parchment, the space where messages from Neville’s clone usually appeared. It slowly began to form itself into letters, but they were blood red, and not in the untidy scrawl that Neville generally employed. The letters were slanting and slashing, written with bold, almost violent strokes, and their very presence on the paper sent out an unmistakable air of malevolence.

And the words read,

Hello, Mrs. Potter.

TBC

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Crescendo

For a long moment, Hermione and Fleur could only stare at the parchment's ominous message with dumbfounded shock.

Hello, Mrs. Potter.

The words were insidiously polite. Almost against her will, Hermione found herself looking nervously over her shoulder, as if she thought the salutation had been spoken by a malevolent new arrival there in the cavern.

Helplessly, she met Fleur's eyes.

"What's wrong?" Ginny asked, not failing to notice the tension between the other two, which had skyrocketed with the sudden appearance of words on the Map. Hermione quickly filled her in.

"Who – who is writing – how could they know – ?" Fleur stammered, clutching little William closer, pressing his cheek against her chest.

"Neville..." Hermione spoke, and her voice was a barely intelligible squeak. "Neville was... with Voldemort, and now – now Voldemort has his Map."

"But how does he know you're here?" Fleur whispered, as if the Map had suddenly sprouted ears. "At the other end of the Map?"

"More to the point," Ginny interjected. "How does he even know that there is a Mrs. Potter?" The three of them sat in silence, as they digested this stunning revelation. William began to snuffle in distress, also picking up on his mother's strain.

And Hermione realized the truth, something so paralyzing that she thought her heart might cease to beat, and her lungs refuse to take in air.

"Neville..." she managed to say again. "Like – oh my God – like Thaddeus Brookhaven." She could still hear the sickening shriek of

the young Auror, along with the crack of wood as he was Summoned right through the wall of the safehouse.

Fleur's lips parted in utter horror, and her pupils seemed to dilate until her eyes looked huge and very dark.

"If – if he broke into Neville's mind – if he found out who you are, then –"

"He could know where we are," Hermione finished for her, feeling the words woodenly leave her numb lips. "And he could know – Harry!" She broke off suddenly, her voice cracking in the middle of her husband's name.

"What is it?" Fleur asked. Once again, it was Ginny who answered.

"The Map. If he can access Neville's Map, then he'll know exactly where on Hogwarts' grounds every single fighter is."

"Then they're walking right into a trap," Fleur's low exclamation was almost frenzied in its despair. She flung a glance over her shoulder at the scattering of discarded medallions. "And we've no way to tell them..."

Panic was welling up within Hermione like a bubble, rising and tightening until she thought she'd no longer be able to think clearly. She was assailed by her own mental pictures of Harry, on the green at Hogwarts, looking proud and defiant, even while disarmed and surrounded by Death Eaters, of Harry, bloodied and battered, bathed in green light, mouth open in a soundless cry, of Harry, bent over Ginny, his eyes closed, her hand clasped in his, as he fought to bring her back...

She thought of the words she'd said when she made him take her wand.

We're linked, Harry.

So were Harry and Voldemort. If enough time went by, Voldemort would be able to sense Harry's magic in the vicinity anyway. Would

Voldemort be able to sense her by extension, or did he already know where the feeble remnants of the Order hid? It was a risk that they had no choice but to take.

“I’ll try...” she choked out. “I’ll see if I can reach him...somehow.” She clasped her hands around the obstacle in her lap, glorying briefly in Laurel’s reassuring presence, and closed her eyes, bowing her head, as if in prayer.

And she reached out, extended beyond herself, farther than she’d ever tried before, feeling a tense, taut stretching sensation in her mind, hoping that she’d be able to find her way back.

Harry?

There was nothing.

She pushed again, and the pain in her head was terrific. She knew that, ideally, Legilimency needed eye contact, that the imprint that Harry had left in her mind after he was captured had been unusual, if not unheard of. She was hoping against hope that the last message they had exchanged mentally – his almost casually sent I love you, and her response, I know – was enough to facilitate what she was trying to do. It had worked before, but she had only gotten flashes of Harry; he had not been trying to actively send her a message, nor she him, while he had been imprisoned by Voldemort.

Air rushed out of her lungs, in a kind of pained sigh, and she slumped forward onto the table, spent. It’s not going to work, she thought, in a dull despair that was almost resigned. I can’t reach him from here.

Her eye was drawn once again to the Map, watching as Harry’s team made its way through the dungeons, as the Death Eaters began to slowly filter down towards them, smoothly and quietly taking up stations – to wait...

Panic like she’d never known thrummed through her veins like quicksilver. She had been so sure, so confident that their plan would succeed – that the Repository Stones in the tip of Harry’s wand held the means by which Voldemort could be destroyed. But if Harry were

ambushed, disarmed, if he were accidentally killed in a scuffle, before brought to Voldemort... if...

Wretched helplessness wrenched her from inside out. She could not go and warn them – she had promised Harry. None of those who remained were in a fit state to go. Her lungs and throat begin to ache with the desire to expel a sob. Laurel twisted inside her so tightly that it was painful.

“I’ll go,” Fleur said quietly, as if reading Hermione’s mind, and Hermione jerked upward in astonishment.

“You can’t go,” she found herself saying automatically.

“And why not?” the Frenchwoman asked, with one eyebrow elegantly arched. “I am in perfect health, am I not? There is nothing – nothing physical – that hinders me from going.” She lifted her chin regally, even while her eyes clouded at the thought of leaving William.

“You just gave birth,” Ginny pointed out, somewhat obviously.

“Let me go,” rasped a voice from behind them. They all turned to see Ron standing there, supporting himself by leaning heavily on the back of a chair. He was so pale that his skin almost seemed translucent, and Hermione had never seen him look so unhealthily thin. The shadows beneath his eyes were nearly black.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Ron,” Hermione snapped, masking the way his presence hurt her by sharpening her voice. “You can barely walk. Does Madam Pomfrey know you’re up?”

“What about Madam Pomfrey?” Ginny suggested quietly. “She’s not...incapacitated in any way.” There was a tinge of bitterness in the youngest Weasley’s voice.

“Ron’s too ill,” Hermione shot down that suggestion quickly. “If – if she didn’t come back...”

“We’ve got to be able to do something!” The redhead retorted, desperate anger flushing her cheeks. She slapped her open palm down on the table, crumpling one corner of the Map beneath it.

Hermione’s eyes were drawn to the Map once again. Harry’s team had fanned out, splitting into several of the lesser traveled lower corridors, but Hermione could see Death Eaters lying in wait for each group. They could not hope to defeat an enemy who knew their every move, and she wished once again that they had taken the Map with them. Blaise and Harry had agreed that it was better to leave it at the cavern, hoping to meet up with Neville’s clone in the castle.

The Death Eaters would still know where they were, Hermione thought, but if Harry had the Map, at least he would know they knew.

She barely noticed Ron sag into the chair adjacent to hers, watching the Map almost as intently as she was. Laurel thrashed again, and she shifted jerkily as pain shot through her back. She absently noted the thinned numbers of Death Eaters, and mentally sent up thanks to Neville’s clone, thinking that he had more than made up for his involuntary attempts at espionage. If they hadn’t been able to capitalize on the fact that copies could be destroyed along with the Primes, then...

She straightened up suddenly, gasping as a thought occurred to her, barely noticing the dull ache that diffused down into her thigh muscles.

“Copies...” she breathed, wonderingly, drawing everyone’s attention.

“What have you thought of, Hermione?” Ron asked.

“Do we have the original Map?” she asked.

“I think so,” he replied.

“Lupin helped make the copy, so that Neville’s clone could take it with him,” Ginny chimed in.

“Why?” Ron added, curiously, referring to Hermione’s original question.

"If we destroy our Map, do you think – mightn't we also destroy the copy?" She felt as if she were out of breath, and leaned back a little, trying to ease the pain in her back. Laurel was kicking her so hard.

"There's only one way to find out," Ron noted, fumbling for his wand.

"Wait!" Hermione stayed his hand. "They still don't know that Death Eaters are in position. I need your help, Ron. You've got to try to get me to Harry's mind." She lay one pleading hand on his arm, but Ron was already shaking his head.

"I don't think it's possible."

"I know it's a long shot, but we've got to try. You helped me before, remember? Please, Ron." She was thinking of Harry, wading backwards into the Lake, his eyes fastened on hers.

I love you.

I know.

Ron pressed his lips together, as if he'd like to protest, but he finally nodded. Hermione closed her eyes again, braced herself against the table, as her muscles seemed to twist agonizingly, and reached...

This time, she could feel Ron's mind with hers, behind her, bolstering her, although she was alarmed at how frail he seemed, his mind almost flickering, a mere candle-shadow of the last time they had linked minds, when Harry was freed from the Circle.

Go...she felt him say. The strain was evident. Hurry...

Pain... the pain was everywhere...inside her, outside her, her head, her abdomen, swirling around her, threatening to overwhelm her. Too much... something inside her shrieked... She felt as if she was trying to claw her way to the surface, but didn't know which way was up.

And there was fear and tension, snaking around her, insidiously gleeful – torches glowed on dull stone walls – things were lurking in

shadows, there were whispers winding down corridors, paranoia, worry, determination married to despair – what was that?— heartbeats that quickened with surges of adrenaline.

Somewhere far away, a baby fussed – Laurel? – and Hermione could not tell whether the sound was generated from within, or came from without – and just when the pain threatened to drown her in its depths, smother her beneath its weight, she found him, a warm, comforting presence, seeming to burn white-hot with the knowledge of the necessity of what he had to do. His very determination made him a beacon for her; in her mind, he glowed like a brand, calling her to him.

Harry? She felt him startle, swear in his mind, and panic briefly, before he realized who it was.

Hermione, what the hell? How on earth did you – ?

There's no time, she interrupted him. Voldemort has Neville's copy of the Map. Sadness tinged the edges of Harry's mind. He did not have to ask how Voldemort had come by that copy. They're waiting for you, they know your position. We're going to destroy the original Map, and maybe that will destroy his Map as well.

White haze seemed to be overtaking her, and the pain was so rampant now that she couldn't tell if it was Ron's or hers or both. She hoped it wasn't bleeding over onto Harry.

Anger licked around the edges of her consciousness like tongues of flame, and she wondered briefly from where it originated.

...framed portraits in a round room...a visage in a mirror, red-eyed, wraith-like...

She froze suddenly, wondering if she had inadvertently traversed the link between Harry and Voldemort. She felt like prey that had suddenly stumbled upon a dangerous predator unawares, and slowly backed her mind away, hoping that he would not sense her presence.

I've got to go, she breathed to Harry, feeling the sudden upsurge of her pulse relax, as there seemed to be no malicious presence trailing

hers. Be careful. She reached out to briefly caress Harry's mind with hers, and felt the pain increase to an ever more soaring crescendo.

Hermione... he began, but unable to last any longer, she let go, and she felt something cold against her face, as the pain rose up ever higher, and far, far away someone was screaming...

When she opened her eyes again, she was on the floor and the coolness of the stone was seeping through her clothing. There was something warm and wet on her cheeks, and she realized that she had begun to bleed from her nose and ears. Madam Pomfrey was hovering over her, and Ron was holding her hand, looking scared to death.

"He knows. I told him," she informed them, trying to rise, but hissing a breath through her teeth, as her cumbersome stomach protested. Together, Ron and Madam Pomfrey helped her to her feet.

"Mrs. Potter, are you quite all right?" the mediwitch asked, daubing away the blood with quick, short strokes of her wand. Her use of Hermione's married name startled the younger witch, and Hermione jerked her gaze down at the Map, her eyes falling on the slashing handwriting at the bottom.

Hello, Mrs. Potter.

Hermione seized a quill, and wrote neatly beneath:

Go to hell, Tom. And lit the corner of the Map with her wand.

Blue flame hungrily lapped at the dry parchment, as it began to curl up and crumble into a powdery ash that fell like snow at their feet. Hermione held the top-most corner between thumb and forefinger, until the heat compelled her to drop it, and the Map burned serenely as they all watched, hoping that, up at Hogwarts, there was another parchment burning.

The title of the Map seemed to flare with a brief, but bright, orange gleam, before the parchment was completely consumed. The last thing Hermione saw was ...tail and Prongs.

And then it was gone.

Hermione felt another pang of regret, as she realized that it was one of the last legacies that Harry had from his father, and that it had been utterly destroyed by her hand. She felt a hand gently cup her shoulder, and looked up to see Ron's sympathetic expression.

"Hey," he said, "you know he'll understand. If there was even a chance that destroying it might work..."

"I know," she replied softly. "I just hope it was enough..."

She broke off suddenly, as the pain returned, with renewed vengeance, and at first, she couldn't understand why. She was no longer reaching beyond herself; she had returned safely to her own consciousness. She threw a bewildered look at Ron, as her knees simply ceased to hold her up, and he caught her under one elbow, nearly toppling himself in the process.

"Hermione...Hermione?" Ron was saying her name over and over again, and somehow she could not make the word have much meaning at all. A wail ripped through her and from her like a klaxon of denial, as she realized, looking at the ring of shocked and worried faces around her, what was happening.

"Hermione, dear..." Madam Pomfrey began, sounding surprisingly casual and tender. Harry's wife was already shaking her head.

"No," she bit out, and it didn't even sound like her voice. "No. Not now. Not like this. He's not here – he's not here – and it's too early. Six weeks – too early." She was almost gibbering now, terrified and panicking, recalling with too-perfect clarity Luna's Yuletide prophecy.

"Born out of light, into light, at the heart of rebirth,

Illumination in darkness, bringer of

Hope in death,

Hope in death,

Hope in death,”

She had repeated the last phrase several times, before she even realized that she was speaking aloud.

Whose death? Whose?

“He’s going to die. He’s going to die,” she said, half out of her head. She clutched at Ron’s sleeve, as Laurel writhed within her. The pressure in her back was immense. “It’s my fault. It’s my fault for having her now. I’m having her now. Her birth, his death, my fault.”

“Hermione!” Ron’s grip was vise-like around her upper arms, as he squared her around to face him directly, his intense blue eyes only centimeters from her unfocused brown ones.

She let herself sag against his grip again, as the pain threatened to twist her in two. Was this normal – was it normal for labor to come on so suddenly and violently?

Whose death? She wondered again, Maybe mine?

“I need Harry,” she said, scared beyond all of her normal logic and practicality that somehow the prophecy was fulfilling itself right in front of her, that she was powerless to stop or alter what would happen, that her ability to control her own destiny – and Laurel’s – had been ripped from her – or had never been hers to begin with.

“He’s not here,” Ron told her firmly, with a straightforwardness that she was suddenly and overwhelmingly grateful for. “And you need to pull yourself together. For Laurel.”

She blinked at him, clarity seeping slowly back into her dazed and frightened eyes.

“L – Laurel,” she stammered. “Right. Yes.” The contraction eased, and she felt as if she’d returned to herself: Hermione, the Brightest

Witch of her Age, who did not shirk or shy from a problem to be solved, a task to complete.

Here was a task – and a most important one, especially for her and Harry – for her to complete.

Don't think about anything else, she ordered herself, talking in that precise matter of fact mental voice that she often used, when motivating herself to study or research. Right now, nothing else matters, except making sure everything is done for Laurel's benefit.

Harry's face swam in her mind for a moment, but she resolutely pushed the thought of his peril away.

Nothing else matters, she said sternly to herself.

She smiled vaguely up at Madam Pomfrey, grateful for Ron's fingers under her elbow.

"I think we should get to the infirmary now."

~*~*~*~

Fleur and Ron helped Hermione sit up, as Madam Pomfrey cast another Refreshing charm on the sheets, which had become wrinkled and damp under her striving body. With the back of one hand, she brushed away wet tendrils of hair that wanted to cling to her cheeks. Fleur's labor had only seemed to progress slowly, she thought, while this – this was actually lasting eons. The sharp edge of the pain had been dulled with a potion, but still crested upon her, wave after unending wave.

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Gray stone erupted into graveled pieces, spraying the corridor with a hollow rattle. Someone swore.

“That was too close,” said a voice – a voice she knew. “Have we heard from Remus’ team yet?”

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“Fred?” Hermione said aloud, confusion adding itself to her breathlessness.

“What?” queried Ron, clearly bewildered. Hermione’s brows lowered, as she tried to figure out what had just happened.

“I – I – ” she began, but the merciless onslaught of another contraction began, and she lost her train of thought, as she clamped down harder around Ron’s fingers.

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Now she was looking down at shoes, scuffed and worn trainers, against a backdrop of flagstone that flickered in torchlight. The shoes paused, shuffled and recoiled slightly, before stepping gingerly over a body. A hand pulled at a robe, so that the hem would not drag, and Hermione saw the blank, staring eyes of Antonin Dolohov. Part of the wall had fallen in on him.

“We’ve got to move this stone.” Harry spoke, his voice quietly frantic. “We’re going to be pinned down.”

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“All right then, that’s the last of that one. Relax for a moment, Mrs. Potter,” said Madam Pomfrey, and Hermione collapsed backwards onto the supple surface of the mattress. “You’re coming along nicely.”

“How – how much longer?” Hermione asked.

“You’re at 4 cm,” the mediwitch replied, sounding somewhat reluctant. “It may yet be awhile.”

Hermione seesawed between apathy, anticipation, and despair; this was her baby – hers and Harry’s – and they’d been waiting for her for so long. If she was totally honest with herself, however, all she wanted at that moment was Harry. It was difficult to try and focus on something besides him, difficult to deliver his daughter, while wondering if he’d ever meet her.

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Harry whirled, whipping his wand up at the running footsteps that rounded the corner, but dropped it quickly as Blaise appeared, clothing torn, covered in an ashy gray powder.

“Where are the rest?” Harry demanded, fear driving anger into his voice. “Where’s Remus?”

Blaise could barely speak, leaning over to brace his hands on his thighs, trying to slow and deepen his breathing..

“We were drawing them off – had them over toward Gryffindor Tower, but – ”

“But?” Harry prompted.

“There was an explosion or something – didn’t you hear it? Felt like the bloody castle was coming apart. I dug myself out of the rubble – I – I don’t know what’s happened to the others.”

Harry appeared torn, looking first at the tumbled wall and then back in the direction from which Blaise had come.

“We’ve got to get through here. He’s waiting for me, and the quicker I get there, perhaps the fewer people will die.”

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“Hermione?” Ron’s voice broke in again, and she looked at him, startled, as if she’d had no idea he was standing there.

“I can see it,” she panted. Ron looked dubiously in the direction that her eyes had been pointed.

“See what?”

“I can see it – see him, the battle. He’s trying to get to the headmaster’s office.” Her voice was as breathy as Luna at her dreamiest.

“Madam Pomfrey!” Ron called with obvious alarm, drawing the mediwitch’s attention from the potion that she’d been measuring out. “Hermione’s hallucinating!”

“Not hallucinating,” Hermione corrected him, stiffening as the pain began anew. “I can see him, Ron.”

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Padma Patil was stationed at the corner, keeping watch down the next corridor, as the other team members Levitated the pieces of the wall – some the height of a first-year – out of the way.

“Someone’s coming,” she hissed, causing everyone else to redouble their efforts.

“We’re almost done,” Fred said. “Should we blast it?”

“They’d come even faster,” Harry said, negating the suggestion.

“And we don’t know what that would do to the rest of this wall,” Blaise added, eying the ruined structure warily. Dimly, the remains of

splintered desks, dusty with disuse, could be seen in one of the exposed classrooms. They worked as fast as they could, pausing only when they heard Padma cast a spell; there was an answering cry and a crash.

Then the battle began in earnest. Two others – fairly new members from the cooperative – joined Padma at the corner. The air began to thicken with vapor from spellfire; one yell was cut off as blood spattered unevenly across the stones.

As soon as they got a big enough breach in the collapsed wall, Fred Weasley shoved Harry through it first, even as he protested.

“Come on!” he shouted, waving his one arm for Blaise and the others to go through. “Padma! Gordon!”

The young man with pale hair ducked through the opening.

“Where’s Ramey?”

“Dead,” was the broken reply.

Fred was reaching for Padma’s hand, pulling her through; the flickering light was very bright now on the walls, as many lit wands approached; a new sound – almost a sonic whine – grew to a swelling crescendo, and the smallest pieces of rock began to rattle ominously. A few of the Order members gasped and put their hands to their ears.

In the space of a heartbeat, the entire wall had caved in, completely burying Dolohov beneath it. Fred lost his grip on Padma, as he staggered backwards and fell; her shriek was swallowed up by the hollow voice of the falling rock.

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“NO!” Hermione cried aloud, and then realized where she was. But Ron was not looking at her; instead he was staring toward the entrance to the infirmary.

“What the hell was that?” he asked.

“You – you heard that too?” she said, surprised. Then she noticed that everyone was focused, transfixed toward the transparent dividers. Fleur edged toward the door, and peered out, even as shrill, repetitive alarm began to wail. The lights flickered.

“The water – the Lake – something is stirring it,” she reported back, her voice higher than normal.

“Check the panel in the War Room,” Ron said. “Is it blinking?” Fleur checked and assured him that it was. “Then the wards are coming down.”

“Which ones?” Ginny cried.

“Does it matter?” Ron asked, the caustic tone born of fear.

“All of them,” Hermione croaked, as the pain bore down on her once more. Questioning eyes all turned to her. “He’s taken – he’s taken them all down – everything – there’re no more protections at Hogwarts.”

She knew – knew without knowing how she knew – that that had been the horrible, bone-jarring sound she’d heard.

“That will rip the very stones from their foundations,” Madam Pomfrey declared. “The Founders’ magic – Hogwarts cannot survive without it.”

“He knows – he knows... and he doesn’t care...” Hermione gasped. The contraction clawed at her from the inside, and her eyes rolled up in her head, as she fought to stay conscious.

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“What the hell is going on?” Harry shouted to be heard above the din, the very mortises and joists of Hogwarts crying out in protest. There were screams of fear from the portraits.

“He’s bringing the castle down on top of us,” Blaise yelled back. There was a deafening sound from further away that may have been one of the towers collapsing in on itself.

“Why? He’ll die right along with everyone else!” Somewhere, the castle hallways were now open to the outside air, and a cool draft swept through, ruffling their hair.

“P’raps he doesn’t care anymore,” Blaise lifted one shoulder in suggestion, “s’long as he kills you.”

Harry stopped and stared at Blaise for a long moment, as if trying to ascertain the plausibility of what he’d said.

No, Harry, Hermione thought desperately, unable to tell if he could hear her or not, unsure of why she was suddenly mentally slingshotting back and forth between the two places. You know how he operates; you know how much he fears death. He wouldn’t kill himself, and he doesn’t want you to die yet – not until he has the opportunity to look you in the face, and laugh at your pain. You know him – he’ll want to...

She stopped suddenly, and horror flooded her.

Hello, Mrs. Potter, she remembered the words slashed onto the bottom of the Map.

The wards are down...her thoughts were coming at her like disjointed gasps. The wards are down...Harry!

She had no idea if he heard her – he did not look around startled, or attempt to communicate with her mentally – but evidently they had arrived simultaneously at the same conclusion.

“Dear God...” he said. “Hermione. He knows about Hermione.”

To his credit, Blaise did not appear nonplussed or surprised at this sudden burst of information. He put a supportive hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“That’s all right then,” he said. “He can’t know where she is, or how to get there.”

Harry shook his head brokenly.

“Neville...”

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“They’re coming!” Hermione shouted suddenly, as her heart pounded a staccato rhythm within her chest.

“Who’s coming, dear?” Madam Pomfrey asked, in that tolerantly maternal voice that she used for patients who were hysterical, but her eyes darted up to the dividers. Ginny sat nervously on the edge of a chair, as if she’d like to leap up at any moment, and Fleur and Ron were nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s Ron? They’re coming! We’ve got to get out of here now!”

Madam Pomfrey’s eyes were solemn, and she pressed her lips together, appearing to try to compose herself enough to speak placidly.

“Mrs. Potter, I’m afraid you’re in no condition to go anywhere at this moment. And besides that, where would we go?”

“Down Remus’ tunnel,” Ron’s voice preceded him back into the infirmary. “We’ll have to cave in the entrance behind us. It’s the only way. Fleur’s packing up the most confidential stuff – ” he shook his head suddenly, “Though I guess it doesn’t really matter now. Madam Pomfrey, can you get everything you’ll need for the – for Laurel?”

The mediwitch was already in motion. Ron came to the bedside, and looked at Hermione for a moment, his eyes as solemn and tenderly stalwart as she had ever seen them.

“Ready to go?” he asked.

“Ron, don’t be ridiculous,” she said, the asperity in her voice a shade of its former glory. “You are in no condition to pick me up. Besides, I’m the size of a Hungarian Horntail.”

“Quit thinking like a Muggle,” Ron said, with a shadow of his quirky grin, and, as he flourished his wand, she rose gently up into the air. Not taking his eyes off of her, he backed up until he was near his sister, and held out his hand for her. “Ginny?”

She stood in response, and tucked her hand through his elbow.

They could hear clattering from the laboratory as Fleur hastily threw things into a rucksack, and Hermione hoped that she’d cast a Cushioning charm first. Not that it will matter now, she thought, unconsciously echoing what Ron had said, if – if they catch us.

They made their way into a small opening, tucked back into a corner of the cavern, which led them into a serpentine tunnel that wound and twisted its way to nowhere.

“There’s no way out,” Ginny observed, and her voice sounded shrill.

“We’re not trying to escape,” Ron responded. “We’re trying to hide. I put as much resistance at the Lake as I could... it probably won’t hold them for long.”

“We could use our medallions,” Hermione offered, feeling slightly ashamed that she hadn’t thought of it before, and wondering that Ron hadn’t. He quirked one eyebrow at her.

“There’s no one with a medallion outside of here, remember? Unless you fancy giving birth up in a tree in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Then you should go – get out of here. There’s no reason for any of you to stay.” Hermione felt another contraction grip her, and a moan escaped from between her gritted teeth. Ron said only,

“Don’t be stupid, Hermione.”

In the ensuing silence, they could hear the shuffling taps of rapidly moving feet. An instant later, Fleur, with the rucksack on her back, and baby William strapped to her chest appeared, followed by a similarly laden Madam Pomfrey.

“Get back behind me,” Ron instructed, “Somebody hold Hermione.” Fleur took over the spell, while Ron uttered the words that would cave in the entrance, covering the opening with crumbled rock. The artificial light they had installed in the cavern was blotted out, and it was utterly dark.

“Lumos,” Ginny said, and the rest of them inspected Ron’s handiwork.

“It’ll have to do,” Ron said, casting a few more security spells, but looking dubious as to the eventual outcome.

“All of you should go,” Hermione ground out. “I’ve read plenty of books. I know what to do.”

“And should the Death Eaters break through?” Fleur said archly. “Will you also fight while you are delivering the baby?”

Guilt and despair drained what color was left from Hermione’s face. She held out one hand for Fleur to clasp.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “They’re coming because I’m here. You’re staying because I’m here. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Fleur said softly. “I’d be dead, and so would my sweet Guillaume – if not for you.”

“Let’s go,” Ron said, thrusting his wand upwards and taking over the Levitation spell again. “We’ve got to get as far back as we can. And Fleur, you’d better cast Silencio on William – just in case.”

They began to trudge away from the now defunct entrance, the silence feeling oppressive as it and its companion, fear, crowded the narrow pathway with them. With the analytical part of her mind that was never completely turned off, Hermione noted the deep gouges left in the walls by maddened claws. In places, the smooth floor had been worn to the slightest of dips from canine pacing. A couple of times, Ron stumbled in these, and Hermione felt herself drop suddenly and quickly correct, accompanied by a mumbled apology from her best friend.

The pain was not exactly growing worse – the potion was taking care of that – but the pressure was increasing and the onslaught was coming faster. She knew it wouldn't be long now, and she felt the tears leaking from the corners of her eyes as she thought of Harry.

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Harry was walking through the corridors near the headmaster's office; he, Seamus, and Blaise were keeping close to the more uncertain lighting near the walls. Harry sounded grim and worried, when he said,

"You should've gone with the others."

"We might not be able to fight Voldemort for you," Seamus said, shaking his head. "But we can make damn sure you get to him in one piece."

"The Death Eaters won't kill me," Harry hissed in argument. "They want to – " He broke off as a red beam of light sang above his head, causing the wall sconce to clatter noisily to the floor. The three fighters instantly dropped into postures of attack.

"You were saying?" Blaise offered lightly.

Three Death Eaters issued from behind a tapestry, and when the battle was fully engaged, Lucius Malfoy also appeared in their midst,

smiling mirthlessly as he took a bead on Harry. His thin lips parted as he spoke in a blood-chilling voice of supreme satisfaction,

“Crucio.”

Harry’s arm flew upwards of its own accord, sent into spasm by his frenzied nerve endings, and Hermione’s wand sailed through the air, quickly becoming lost to sight in the chaos.

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“Harry!” Hermione shrieked, startling everyone in the tunnel with her.

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He didn’t feel the pain of actually striking the floor, his system was already overloading by the pain that couldn’t be overcome or assuaged. His body convulsed, and he barely registered the hoarse screaming as coming from his own throat.

There was a crowd of laughter, and a curse from Seamus that was never completed. There was a solid noise as a body collided with a wall.

He heard Lucius repeat the curse again, and his nerves sizzled with acid fire.

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“What’s the matter? What’s happening?” Ron asked intensely, his eyes boring into hers.

“I thought... I was ‘hallucinating’,” Hermione murmured, slanting a look at him to enjoy his expression of chagrin. But then she took pity

on him; he was the only one in the room who understood how badly she wanted to be by Harry's side, the only one who wanted to be there as badly as she.

"Lucius... Malfoy," she informed them. Ginny made a strangled noise in the back of her throat. "He – he's used Crucio on Harry."

Ron paled even more, and his wand hand shook.

"I – I thought..."

"They won't kill him," Hermione said, her calm tone belying how Harry's pain was tearing at her. "They'll do everything but..." Another contraction hit, and she clenched her jaw.

Illumination in darkness... hope in death.

Please not Harry's, she pleaded, with whoever might be listening. Please...

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"...very disappointing, Mr. Zabini. To desert the Dark Lord, and side with... with this?" Lucius flicked his long cloak backwards, contemptuously. "Potter, we could perhaps excuse, but you – you were raised to know better." Precise clicks echoed in the corridor, as he paced forward, then back. "However, he could be merciful if...if you tell us where they were hiding, what they had planned, who were among their number?"

There was a long silence. Harry shifted slightly and tried to stifle a moan, clearly in terrible pain, but just as clearly not wanting to reclaim the attention of the Death Eaters at the moment. Hermione noted from her observer's position that Harry had scrabbled something under his palm, that he was trying in vain to subtly close his fingers around it, but his body was not cooperating.

“You make an interesting offer,” Blaise mused. “We’d be better able to discuss this as equals if you returned my wand to me.”

Lucius’ sudden laughter rang out in the hallway, startling Hermione – and Harry, who froze his tentative movements and became very still.

“Mr. Zabini, I cannot in good conscience allow you to keep laboring under the delusion that we are equals. You are a traitor. Your cooperation would merely reflect itself in the rapidity... or exquisite slowness... of your death.”

Blaise’s eyes widened, as he considered Lucius’ offer – or seemed to. His gaze flicked briefly to Harry. Hermione could see now that Harry had a wand – her wand, if she was seeing correctly. The Death Eaters had evidently lost track of it, when they disarmed Harry, and now, by merest chance, he had ended up near it. He tried to grip it, but a spasm shook his arm, and the wand rolled away from him, out of reach.

She felt, rather than heard, his intense disappointment. She felt herself straining with him to reach it. Accio...she thought... just a little bit more.

“You want me to answer your questions?” Blaise began to tick the points off on his fingers. “Where we were hiding is irrelevant, as we are hiding no longer. As to what is being planned and who is with us – just look around this castle.” He spread his arms in a lofty and expansive gesture. “I should think it obvious.”

One corner of Lucius’ mouth went downward in a slash of disapproval.

“Your name is too good for you,” he said, and whipped his wand upward.

Hermione’s wand shot into Harry’s hand, as if pulled there by magnetic force, and red fire blazed from its tip, even as he was still prone on the floor. Blaise flung himself to one side, dodging Lucius’ curse, and the battle erupted once again.

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A low rumble seemed to issue from the very bowels of the cave itself, causing their pitiful little band to look around nervously. There was a hiss like escaping steam, as a fine shower of dust and tiny gravel rained down around them. Hermione noticed Ron glancing anxiously toward the ceiling.

“Are they here?” Ginny quavered anxiously. The grim silence that met her question was response enough. And then, a bluish light engulfed them, buzzing briefly, and winking out almost as suddenly as it had come. Hermione felt her hair crackle with the intensity.

“They’re searching for concealed passageways. They’ll locate this tunnel soon.”

“Let’s step it up a bit, shall we?” Ron remarked lightly, brandishing his wand again, and picking up the pace. Hermione could see the pallor on him, though, and the way his chest was hollowing out when he breathed.

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Harry was being marched up the spiral staircase to the office of the Headmaster of Hogwarts, his arms spellbound behind his back, and Lucius Malfoy jabbing his wand between his shoulder blades.

Seamus and Blaise were nowhere to be seen. Hermione surmised that it must have gone quite badly. She saw her wand in Lucius’ other hand, and could only hope against hope that Harry’s wand had evaded detection, that the Disarming spell had caught the first wand, and no one had bothered casting it on him again.

Lucius rapped sharply on the door, and called out,

“I have him, my lord.”

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“And so it’s all come down to this,” Hermione murmured, causing Ron to look at her sharply.

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When Harry entered the office, Voldemort was hunched over something, watching it intently. Hermione could barely make out what looked like parchment, ash-gray and feathery, as if it had been hastily reassembled from shredded scraps. She was glad to see that it was only partially legible. He scraped the tip of one pointed fingernail through a portion of it, creating a neat, dark line.

He looked up at Harry and smiled mirthlessly.

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The rumble became a roar, as the sifting shower of dust became a storm. A vicious crack bisected the ceiling, and the rocks themselves seemed to cry out in agonized protest.

“Bloody hell!” Ron exclaimed, trying to shield Hermione.

“He’s found us!” Hermione’s voice cracked with fear and pain.

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“So here we are again, Mr. Potter,” Voldemort smiled calmly, as if meeting someone with whom he had an appointment. “It greatly resembles our last meeting, wouldn’t you agree?”

“If you mean that you’ve taken me prisoner and disarmed me because you’re afraid to face me like a man, then I do agree that they are similar.”

Red fury flared briefly into Voldemort’s eyes, but he did not lose control.

“How does it feel knowing that all your struggles, all your efforts to resist me were for naught? How do you like knowing that you and all your friends – your wife – are about to die?”

Terror had leached the color from Harry’s face on Voldemort’s last few words, though he was struggling not to show it.

“What are you talking about – my wife?” he stammered roughly, trying to feign ignorance.

Voldemort shot him a look that was mock-pity. He tapped his finger on the remnants of the Map.

“My followers are almost upon them.”

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When Hermione floated back to awareness in Remus’ tunnel, Ron was saying,

“Criminy, here they come.”

And, indeed, over the creaks and whines of uneasy stone, Hermione could hear the rush and rustle of footfalls and whispered shouts. They were not making much attempt to sneak up upon their prey.

They know there’s no way out, Hermione thought glumly, and they could have realized that, for whatever reason, Apparation was not an option.

Another minor rumble sent down a small cascade of good-sized rocks, and one of them winged Ron, while another narrowly missed Fleur, who bit off a cry of dismay. Ron gave a hoarse cry of pain and staggered sideways, but managed to recover before Hermione plummeted to the stone floor.

“Ron, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he said, not at all convincingly. They came to a widened place in the tunnel, where it split into two paths. “I didn’t think there were any other paths but this one.”

“There’s a sort of a den to the left,” said Ginny, who’d helped to excavate the tunnel. “We broke through to a natural little cavern. No outlet though,” she added quickly to their hopeful looks. “The right just winds around a little before it stops completely.”

“The cave would be easier to spread out and mount a defense,” said Fleur decisively. “And we could pick them off more easily, especially if the entrance is small.”

“Then we go to the left,” Ron said, and had only begun to move in that direction, when spellfire whined above their heads, leaving a black gouge in the ceiling. The tunnel moaned restlessly, as the ragtag team plastered themselves up against the nearest wall. Ron carefully leaned Hermione against the wall behind him, while Ginny and Fleur put up a combined Protego.

Hermione found herself slumping down into a squat, feeling incredible pressure, and wanting to hunch over.

“Hermione, get back!” Ron shouted, trying to move where she wasn’t so exposed.

“I need to push,” she admitted, and Ron’s eyes widened in a way that would have been comical in a different situation.

Spells sang randomly down the tunnel, as Ginny and Fleur tried to answer back. The Death Eaters weren’t in sight yet, but knew they were close.

“They’re pinning our ears back,” Ron growled, as he tried to step closer to his sister and sister-in-law, while still guarding Hermione. “Madam Pomfrey,” he said. “She needs you. Can you get her into the cave?”

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Harry must have become violent, because he was now being restrained by two Death Eaters, though he was still struggling against them, his eyes sparking furiously.

“You claim I disarmed you,” Voldemort was saying, as he twirled Hermione’s wand slowly in his fingers. “Yet you do not carry your own wand. Did you think to duel me again, without the ... incident... that occurred last time?”

The clench of Harry’s jaw was mutinous. He did not speak.

“Let me make a bargain with you,” Voldemort said, insidiously polite. “Your magic has clearly been restored to you. If you can take this wand from me, then we shall duel. Like ‘men’, as you put it.” His twisted smirk indicated that he clearly did not consider Harry of his caliber.

Hermione could see quite clearly that Voldemort held his own wand in his other hand. He was making no attempt to conceal it; everyone in the room knew that as soon as Harry Summoned Hermione’s wand – if he could even do so -- Voldemort would cast the Killing Curse.

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A deafening noise drowned out Madam Pomfrey’s reply, as the tunnel, harassed to its limit, finally gave way. Ron stumbled backwards, but managed to shove Hermione down the narrow neck that led to the cavern and then into it, before the rockfall blocked it completely.

Hermione hit the ground heavily, but did not lose consciousness. She became aware of a larger, blacker emptiness around her, able to sense the space of the cave, even though the darkness was total.

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The tension grew, like a rope being winched ever tauter. Harry regarded the Dark Lord, his eyes going first to Hermione's wand, then Voldemort's, as if measuring which would move the faster.

"Do we have an arrangement?" Harry had still not moved, but Hermione could see that one edge of his cloak had billowed unnoticed over his right hand.

"Accio Wand!" he shouted suddenly, his voice cracking with its intensity, attempting to take Voldemort off-guard.

Voldemort's wand moved, Hermione's wand dropped, but Harry's own wand was already in his hand. The slitted red eyes widened in surprise.

"Your guards don't search prisoners very well," Harry said.

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"Ron?" she called out shakily. The need to push was becoming almost painful. "Ron, are you here? I need some light. Ron! The baby's coming, Ron, please."

There was a rustle and then a groan of response,

"I'm here," he said shakily. "Lumos."

"Where are the others?" He shook his head grimly.

"I don't know."

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“Avada Kedavra,” Voldemort said, but Harry’s,

“Priori Incantatem,” was in perfect unison. Brother beams of light arced upward and joined, crackling and spitting out sparks.

“Corripio,” Harry murmured next, repeated the words he’d heard Voldemort say when his powers were being ripped from him. The tip of his wand glowed green, and, for the first time, Voldemort looked afraid.

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“Dammit, Hermione, you’ve got to stay with me,” Ron was shouting at her. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I can’t control it; I can’t stop it,” she replied weakly. “It’s almost all over now.”

“You’ve got to do this,” he said, as she fumbled with her robes, and he tried to help her into a comfortable position, casting a Cushioning charm. He wouldn’t look her in the face, but Hermione felt too emotionally wrung out to be embarrassed by his presence. Another wave rolled in, and she braced her hands on her knees to deliver Harry’s baby.

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Voldemort arched backwards, and yanked at his wand, trying desperately to break the contact. But the beam of light connecting the two wands gradually turned red, and when the red hit Harry’s wand, Voldemort began to scream. The light grew blinding, and the other

Death Eaters, who'd been watching, transfixed, barred from the combat by the same shielding effect from before, began to stumble away and cry out in distress.

Harry lifted his left hand up to steady his grip on the wand, which had begun to tremble in his grasp.

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"I can see the head," Ron announced. "How are you doing?"

"I've been better," Hermione gasped. Sweat was streaming down her neck and dampening her robes.

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And still the red beam kept coming and coming, pulsing forward as through a tube that Harry was draining. Voldemort's drawn-out cry was bone-chilling, earth-rending. Harry's eyes had closed due to the overwhelming glare, but he maintained his two-handed grip. Hogwarts began to tremble in earnest now. What had been left of Dumbledore's tiny silver gadgets began to bounce and vibrate, until they clattered to the floor.

And then Harry himself began to scream.

Hermione smelled burning flesh.

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"Har – ry," Hermione gritted out, as she pushed again. The potion was wearing off, and the pain was mounting.

“Head’s almost out,” Ron remarked. “When you push again, I’ll get the shoulders.” He leaned forward with his wand, to give himself better light, and Hermione saw that the left side of his shirt was scarlet.

“Ron, you’re hurt!”

“I’m fine,” he told her, in a voice that brooked no argument.

“Ron...” she trailed off, as another contraction began. How had she not noticed how badly that rock had hit him? He hadn’t been well to begin with. Her anxious eyes began roving anew over his face, which had a grayish cast.

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The Headmaster’s office shook, as distant rumbles foretold its eventual fall. Bodies of Death Eaters – whether dead or merely unconscious, Hermione could not tell – were strewn everywhere. Behind the desk lay Voldemort’s smoking and distorted remains, so imbued by magic that he could not hope to survive its loss.

And then she saw Harry, collapsed in a heap, hands badly charred, wand a twisted lump. As she tried desperately to discern whether or not he was alive, the portraits began to fall off the walls, as doorframes warped and bowed.

“Get out of there, Harry! Hogwarts is falling! Harry! Move!” she screamed soundlessly, as panic welled up within her.

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“Here she comes,” Ron said, and Hermione shook her head weakly from side to side, unable to rid her mind of the image of Harry, just lying there, as Hogwarts collapsed around him – on top of him.

“Harry...” she said wistfully. “Oh my God.”

“One more push should do it,” Ron said, and then he darted a look at her, and she knew that he was forcing himself to be clinical for her sake, that he wanted more than anything to ask her what was going on, but would not, until he had helped her in this.

From somewhere, Hermione summoned up the strength for one more push, even as her heart broke to pieces within her. And then, with a shrill and reedy wail, the tiny gooey baby that Ron held aloft started putting it back together again.

“Laurel...” she breathed, holding out her arms for the baby, without even realizing she had done so. Ron fumbled a bit, but cut the cord with his wand, and wrapped the baby in the robes that he had quickly shucked off. Without the concealing robes, Hermione could more accurately see how much of his shirt had been soaked in blood.

He handed her the baby, and she took a moment to run a fingertip around the circumference of the little, red face and check the number of fingers and toes. Laurel stared at her mother petulantly from puffy bluish eyes that looked out from under fine, downy black hair.

“Hey baby...” she whispered, captivated by the disgruntled face.

“You did really well, Hermione,” Ron said.

“So did you,” she replied, in a voice thickened with tears. She darted another glance at his shirt. “You should sit down.... and let me look at that,” she tacked on as an afterthought.

“It’s – it’s fine,” he insisted, plucking the shirt away from his side with two fingers. It made a squelching noise. “I think – I think I will sit down though.”

His collapse after this admission was so sudden that it startled Hermione. She called his name, her voice becoming a frantic cry, but got no response. The pool of blood that had formed under him began to spread rapidly, glistening in the Lumos-light of his wand.

TBC

Hope people continue to be interested, and I hope the flip-flopping wasn't too confusing. It was the only way I could think of for me to show you the finale, when the whole story has generally been from Hermione's point of view. If there are any questions, please feel free to ask, and I'll try my best to clarify.

You may leave a review on your way out if you like.

Lorien

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Zenith

Hermione wasn't sure how long she'd lain in the cool blackness of the cavern, her brain in neutral, almost in a stupor. Ron...Hogwarts...Harry! It was the spastic movement and gentle snuffling noises from the baby now nestled in her arms that brought her back to herself.

"Oh, poor baby..." she crooned, spouting gentle nonsense, as she cast a Warming charm around her, blindly counted fingers and toes, and pulled a swath of Ron's robes around to cover her head. She tucked the end in tightly.

Ron's Lumos lit their immediate surroundings in a blue-white light, but most of the small cave was still folded into shadow. She looked at his fallen form, and stared until she could see the barest hint of movement in his shoulders, as he inhaled and exhaled.

A distant vibration thrummed gently through the stone, as some disturbance reached her even here, buried in what felt like the bowels of the earth. She cast a glance at the opening to the cave, now blocked with an array of rocks in every imaginable size. Her eyes darted to her baby, and then to Ron. She would not think of Harry, his charred hands, useless wand, crumpled form. She would not think of the weight of that great castle crushing him beneath its stones.

She forced herself into a more upright position, and scooted a short distance to a small grouping of rocks, casting a Cushioning charm, and gently laying Laurel in their midst. Apprehension twisted her stomach into knots. Laurel was breathing without effort, and appeared perfectly normal, though small, and Hermione knew that the most important thing to do was to keep her warm. Still, she fretted about the absence of any qualified healing personnel, and that made her wonder what had become of Madam Pomfrey, Fleur, and Ginny.

She would not think of Harry.

Ron stirred and groaned, and made an abortive attempt to push himself up off of the smooth stone floor, but collapsed back down before he'd gone any sort of distance at all.

“Stay still, Ron,” she warned him, without thinking. Her voice resonated in the cavern, sounding cool and authoritative. “I’m going to need to look at that wound.” She considered the distance between the two of them, hardly more than a couple of meters, but it seemed vast. Her muscles and joints felt as if they’d been transfigured into a gelatinous mass, and she decided against standing, instead using a sort of modified crawl to get to Ron’s side. By the time she reached her goal, she was breathing as heavily as if she’d run a sprint.

Ron was watching her through half-closed eyes.

“How can you move at all?” he mumbled in wonder. She smiled at him, pressing her lips tightly together, as if that would help keep the threatening tears in her eyes, and unbuttoned his shirt. Her fingers were clumsy and slow. She did not want to look at him, afraid of what she might see in his face, but she could feel the weight of his gaze on her, as she moved his medallion out of the way. It made a soft clink as it flipped over his shoulder and hit the stone floor.

“Baby all right?” There was much effort in the few syllables.

“She’s beautiful...perfect,” Hermione said softly. “Thank you, Ron.”

“Didn’t... do much.”

“You saved my life. And hers. Harry will – ” She stopped and gave her full attention to Ron’s injury, struggling to keep a gasp off of her lips. The rock – or whatever had hit him – had left a large discolored area that was sure to bruise badly. The skin had a speckled cast, the blood having been released immediately beneath the unbroken surface. But one of the ropy welts that remained following his attack had also been affected, and it was from here that the copious amounts of blood originated. Fighting panic, she grazed light fingers over his tender skin; when he groaned in response, she could hear the rattle in his chest. She figured he probably had a couple of broken ribs.

Quickly, she stripped off her robes, shivering as the damp air began to seep through her skirt and blouse, but casting hasty Warming

charms at Ron rather than herself. She attempted to stop the bleeding with magic, but the sheer volume of blood overwhelmed the mediocre Coagulation spell attained by Ron's wand. She used her wand to cut the robes into three pieces, and discarded the ruined lower half. She transfigured one piece into a bandage, padded it thickly, and pressed it down to Ron's side, as firmly as she dared. He tossed his head in discomfort, and exhaled air abruptly between his teeth. She hovered over him for one heart-stopping moment before seeing his chest rise and fall and almost sagging to the ground in gratitude that he was merely unconscious. She conceded that it was probably better that way.

She tried to clean herself up as best she could, but it was difficult with only an unfamiliar wand, one remaining piece of transfigured robe and a few cleaning spells at her disposal. The quiet noises of the baby further distracted her. Laurel would probably need to eat soon.

Then she heard it, without comprehension at first, she then seized on the familiar sound – the sound of dripping water. Ron could probably use water, and she was pitifully grateful for this – this something she could do, could control. She dared not use a medallion to move Ron, given both his state and hers, and especially without knowledge of what they could be moving into, but this, at least, she could give him. She remembered going down to the pond on the Weasley property to get water for Harry. Harry... she let a solitary sob escape before clapping her hand over her mouth. Even that terrible and wonderful day that she had gotten him back seemed like an eon ago, while seeing him back into the dark waters of the Lake, eyes fixed on her seemed a lifetime separate.

She turned her head slowly, trying to localize the sound, but having difficulty with the cave's acoustics. Finally, she took a deep breath, and forced herself to her feet. Her head swam and her abdomen throbbed; the joints in her hips felt wobbly and barely functional. She had only taken two steps, when she heard Ron speak again, in a scratchy effortful whisper.

"H'mione?" He sounded afraid.

“I’m here, Ron.” She took comfort in the way her voice resounded, like she was somehow bigger than she was, unruffled, in control. “I was just going to get you some water.”

“Not... thirsty,” he protested.

“But you probably need – ” She began, but he interrupted.

“What happened?” So now he was asking. She took a deep breath, and made her way back over to him, groping for him in the dim light, reaching for his hand and clasping it between both of hers.

“He did it,” she said simply, and it was amazing how those small words could overwhelm her. She could barely get them out, as the tears pricked at her eyelids and burned her nose. “He – Voldemort’s dead. It’s over.” Joy should have tinged her words, but her soul could not have felt heavier. There was a lead weight in her chest.

A faint smile wreathed Ron’s face, and it almost transformed the ghastly pallor. His face looked otherworldly, almost ethereal, and the sight of it shook Hermione badly.

“So... they’ll be coming for us then?”

Hermione opened her mouth to tell him the rest: that she had seen Hogwarts collapsing, that Harry had been lying unconscious, that she had seen no one around him who could have gotten him out in time.

That was when she saw it, a dark glint in the blue-white wandlight. Blood was trickling from the corner of Ron’s mouth. He did not seem to be aware of it.

“Yes, Ron,” Hermione said, and it seemed to her that her throat was quivering so hard that the words would not even be formed, but somehow they emerged coherently. “They’re coming. Just hang on.”

Laurel wailed in earnest then, and Hermione unsteadily made her way back to the infant, knowing that she would have to make an attempt at nursing. She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth so hard that she could feel the indentation of her teeth. Please, oh God –

hope in death, hope in death, not Ron...please not Ron... Her thoughts crashed together, jumbled and scattered, as she scooped up the infant, clutching her soft warmth to her like a garment – or a shield.

She hobbled back over to his side, unable to think of being away from him now, and settled back down, rearranging her clothing and then wincing as Laurel began to suckle tentatively at first, and then more enthusiastically.

“Think...the others’re okay?” Ron startled her by speaking again. “Ginny...”

“I’m sure they’re fine, Ron,” Hermione soothed automatically, the pain that was seizing her heart in its claws overriding any thought behind the words. “I’m sure they’ll break through here soon.”

“Harry – Harry’ll be sorry he missed... being here.” Ron nodded toward Laurel. Hermione bit the inside corners of her lips to keep from surrendering completely to utter despair. Ron...Harry!

Don’t leave me alone here.

“I’m glad you were here.” She tried to infuse lightness, warmth into her voice. It felt false, but she couldn’t tell whether or not Ron could discern that. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

“You’ll tell her, won’t you?” he entreated, moving one hand to grip her elbow. His touch was icy cold.

“Tell who what?” For a moment, Hermione was uncomprehending.

“Tell her – Laurel – tell her how much Uncle Ron... loved her mum ...and dad... and her... right from the first. You will, won’t you?” Hermione lifted horrified eyes to meet his, and she saw the awareness there, his eyes dark with the realization of what was before him.

“Ron...” she choked, wanting to scream, wanting to turn away, hoping that if she denied it hard enough that perhaps it would not happen, that she could keep it from happening by sheer will alone.

“Promise me.” His voice wobbled slightly, but his gaze demanded an answer, and she couldn’t refuse him.

She began nodding, almost frantically, as the tears finally were loosed, burning hot trails down her cheeks.

“Please, Ron, try to hold on.” Her voice was so shaky that she didn’t even recognize it. I’m sure someone will be coming soon. Ginny and Fleur and – and Madam Pomfrey – they weren’t so far away. They – ”

“I want to tell you something...” he broke in again. “I’m glad Harry has you. He deserves...” His eyes were bright, and Hermione saw his true feelings for her in them again. He seemed determined not give those feelings voice this time; at last truly accepting her as my best friend’s wife. His fingers fumbled at her elbow, but he could no longer sustain the grip, and she reached with the hand that was not cradling Laurel, and took his, holding on for both of them.

“Tell him... you tell him... won’t you?”

“I’ll tell him, Ron. I’ll tell them all what you did – that you were a hero. You – ”

She stopped abruptly, as she had been bathed in sudden and complete darkness.

Ron’s Lumos had gone out.

There was a heart-stopping moment as Hermione took in what exactly that meant, with a long, too-slow, sucked-in breath that seemed to increase the painful pressure in her chest rather than relieve it. Would she ever stop feeling this agony, this enormous sense of loss? It seemed unreal. And if she had to relive this later, with someone else...?

But she could not even make her mind approach that.

It can't be true. It is true.

I can't face this. I have to face this.

What will I do now?

The sound of dripping water was lost, as Hermione, still clutching his hand, buried her face in the downy softness of Laurel's head, holding fast to her daughter, wrapped in Ron's robes, as if she hoped somehow to draw strength from the baby, and cried.

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When Hermione awakened again, she felt stiff and sticky. One arm was completely asleep, and her tongue was thick and dry. Laurel stirred against her and mewed a mild complaint. Hermione had no idea how much time had passed, but assumed that it hadn't been too long, as Laurel had not fussed for another meal. Poor baby, she thought... patient baby.

Her eyes roved blindly in the darkness for a moment, as her head throbbed in time with her pulse, and then she remembered. Ron...

She whispered his name once, but no sound met her ears save the implacable dripping. She sniffed once, noisily, and swallowed the knot of tears that seemed determined to take up residence in her throat. More than anything, she would have liked to curl up in that impenetrable dark and let sheer apathy and despair have their way. But whatever scrap of Practical Hermione that remained was informing her that there was Laurel to consider... and Hermione knew that her baby would be her salvation.

She carefully put Laurel down, intent on finding Ron's wand. Her medallion still hung on a chain around her neck, unusable when she was in her throes of labor, but now perhaps she could get herself and Laurel out of here, even though she didn't know the situation in which she would find herself.

I can't leave him. I can't stay here.

What about the others? What about Harry?

Harry...Ron...it hurt so much, as if someone had slung a sledgehammer right into her breastbone. She wasn't sure what would've happened to the Death Eaters with the fall of Voldemort, whether they would have been incapacitated by their Marks, whether they would have fled, or stayed to fight with the ferocity of cornered animals. At any rate, she fiercely hoped, surely, she wouldn't be the only Order member left.

I've got to find someone, see if anyone needs help, if Fleur and Ginny are trapped...

She thought about the medallions planted in the lookouts in the Forbidden Forest, the one in the tunnel that led to the Hogwarts dungeons, the discarded sprinkling of them in the cavern near the cold waters of the Lake.

I've got places I can go. I can get out of here.

She flicked blind eyes over to the area where she knew Ron's still form lay. He'd been wearing his medallion. She could get back to him, bring others, retrieve his body. She couldn't believe she'd just thought that phrase, and tears stung her eyes anew.

Oh, God, Ron... I won't leave you here, I promise.

Laurel gurgled and began to fuss, a petulant sporadic wail that did not sound like her previous cries, and it began to build. The temptation to succumb to panic and loss was seductive, but she tried to push it away, gingerly feeling for Laurel in the darkness.

"Accio wand. Dammit, accio wand!" She was trembling, as her outstretched fingertips skimmed lightly over Laurel's upturned little nose. How could she have lost track of the wand, when the Lumos went out? Where had she set the wand down? She certainly couldn't leave this cavern unarmed, not knowing what she might face on the outside. "Accio..." her voice broke, as she scooped up the now furious baby.

And her hand brushed something smooth and wooden, and the relief that surged up in her chest was powerful enough to surprise her. She gripped Ron's wand tightly in her hands, and leaned her forehead against it, closing her eyes for just a moment before she whispered,

"Lumos."

The light flickered uncertainly at first, and then bloomed out more surely, though somewhat less brightly than Ron's. Hermione tried to rationally survey the situation, her eyes tripping over the stained patch on the floor where she'd given birth, as well as the one mostly obscured by Ron's body. He hadn't been carrying anything, having been occupied primarily with her transport and safety. All the supplies had been in the care of Fleur and Madam Pomfrey. She dared not use her medallion to get to them, having no idea whether or not that would bury her under tons of rock.

She decided to make for one of the lookouts first. There was food there and some basic first aid potions. They had been made for the purpose of reconnaissance, so perhaps she could figure out which way the wind blew, whether or not approaching Hogwarts was safe.

Moving methodically, she unwrapped Laurel, Scourgified Ron's robes, and re-fastened them around the baby. She nursed again, trying to ignore the soreness that seemed to permeate every fiber of her being, and then cast her gaze around for something that she could transfigure to strap the infant to her torso, leaving her arms free. Without really wanting to, she looked to Ron, and noticed his dark leather belt, threaded through the loops of his Muggle jeans that he'd worn beneath his robes.

She took a deep, but uneven breath, and laid Laurel back into her little Cushioned rock crib.

You can do this. It's not really even him anymore, is it?

Still, as her fingers touched the buckle and fumbled with the clasp, the scalding tears fell and splashed on her trembling hands.

Somehow it felt like a violation of the highest order, crass abandonment, unfeeling opportunism.

He would've given you anything, gladly, you know that, right?

She knew it, but it did not make it easier to pull the belt free, to feel his dead weight rocking senselessly, his skin already growing cold to the touch. She felt her gorge rising, but was powerless to stop it, and managed only to fling herself away from Ron and Laurel before vomiting quietly in a darkened corner, moaning with the pain that the spasm of retching caused, and hiccupping with suppressed sobs.

Her face was sticky and clammy, her mouth tasted foully, and her hair was a snarled and matted mess. Carefully listening to the dripping water, she found the tiny pool, had a drink, and washed her face and hands. She would have given anything for a real hot shower, as though she could rinse away all the grief and loss and pain, but she knew that would have to come later. She could barely run her fingers through her hair, but braided it back in a sloppy plait, and fastened the end with a spell. After she picked up the baby, and strapped her in her makeshift sling, she was ready to go.

Her heart thundered as she prepared herself to concentrate on the medallion in the lookout. She forced herself to look at Ron, one last time, and said aloud,

"I won't leave you here. I swear it."

All she could do was hope that what awaited her was not worse than what she left behind. A brief thought of Harry, insensate on the floor of the Headmaster's office, as the castle began to crumble flashed in her mind, but she resolutely pushed it aside.

She winked away, leaving only darkness and death behind her.

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The first thing she registered was that it was raining, a cold relentless rain that the treetops did not fully block out, in a soggy, dull environment that seemed to mirror her very soul. The second thing

was that, though difficult to tell under the steely gray sky, twilight appeared to be in the process of falling.

The third was that a pair of eyes had just Levitated up to the lookout and were peering at her from the other side of the railing.

She screamed then, a short sharp cry born purely from being startled, which she cut off when she realized who it was. It appeared that she had scared him almost as badly, for he exclaimed,

“Sweet Merlin,” and plummeted from sight.

She threw herself toward the railing, leaned over it, and thrust Ron’s wand outward to perform Arresto Momentum, but Neville had recovered himself about halfway down, and was rising again to meet her.

Neither of them said anything until he had safely clambered inside the lookout and cast a Water Repelling shield over both of them. Hermione shook the dripping wayward ringlets out of her eyes, and checked to make sure that Laurel remained snug and dry within Ron’s robes.

“It’s bloody good to see you, Hermione,” Neville finally said. “The others’ll be so glad. And is – is that the – ?”

She nodded, smiling, and leaned over to show him the baby. Her heart leapt at his comment, the others.

“When was she – ?”

“I’m not sure. It was hard to keep track of – I think about six hours ago?”

“They sent you here for safety?” Neville asked. “I was to come and check these out, see if anyone made it here...”

They? It took Hermione a moment to realize what Neville meant.

“No... I just came... there’s nobody...”

Horror filled Neville's eyes.

"Ron?" he whispered. "Ginny?"

"Ron's dead," she breathed, her voice shattering over the statement of that simple fact. "And – and Ginny – Fleur – we were separated. There was a – a cave-in... in Remus' tunnel. I don't – I don't know where they are. The baby...I couldn't..." She gestured helplessly down at Laurel, as if to explain the reason she had not tried to find anyone until now. She felt wretched and ashamed, as if she had failed somehow.

"You're safe now," Neville said, with more authority than she would've given him credit for. "Everyone... that is, everyone who's left – is at Hogwarts...we should go, get you and Laurel out of this rain."

The joy that soared into her eyes must have been more than obvious, for Neville visibly reacted to the look on her face.

"Hogwarts? It still stands?" Harry!

"Well, not most of it," Neville began dubiously. "The Great Hall is sort of intact. Part of it still has a roof, so that's where we've been setting up... camp." He shrugged, for lack of a better word.

"The Death Eaters?"

"They were – I don't know, Stunned or something – when Voldemort ... fell. So far, we've been able to – to round up all of them who weren't killed in the collapse. When I left, Fred and his dad were searching the rubble... for any more of our people – or theirs."

Fred. Mr. Weasley. Hermione seized gratefully on those names, the information that, not only were they alive, but uninjured enough to be doing patrols. They had all been in Hogwarts – if they had survived, then perhaps...

"Harry?" The word came out as a squeak, as though she were unable to get enough air into her lungs.

Neville's face shadowed, and the terrible tight pain reasserted itself into her chest.

"We haven't found him yet."

"He was in – he was in Dumbledore's office – Dumbledore's office... I saw him," Hermione mumbled, not even realizing that she was talking about the late Headmaster in the present tense. Neville did not question how she had such knowledge.

"Hey," he said, taking her gently by the shoulders, and squaring them so she'd face him. "Hey, Hermione. That helps. Okay? It helps to know where to look. Let's go and tell the others. And you need to be seen by – " A spasm of sorrow crossed his face. "Well, we lost Penelope, but – but Megan Jones has turned out to be a pretty decent field Healer."

She started to say something, but Neville beat her to the punch.

"And don't worry. We'll get to the cavern and find the others. I'll see to it myself." He helped her through the gap in the railing. "If you come down slow," he said, "I'll keep the shield up on the way down."

A moment later, their feet were lighting on the soft damp bracken of the forest floor. The woods were hushed, the falling rain giving it the serenity of a cathedral. Hermione felt as if the forest itself were crying with them.

"I walked here. We only just have the one medallion," Neville said, and Hermione remembered again that they had all discarded theirs before leaving for battle. "Nicked it out of the dungeon tunnel. We wanted to secure Hogwarts before we went to the cavern, in case – "

"There were Death Eaters there," Hermione informed him. "They were coming after us. Voldemort ... found out ... where we were."

"We'll need to send people in to secure them," Neville nodded. "And find – and find the others." Hermione knew that he'd been half in love

– maybe more than half – with Ginny, and she hoped the compassion showed in her eyes.

“We’ll find her, Neville.”

“Can – can you think of Remus?” he asked. “He’s got it on.” She nodded, and without further comment, Neville slung one arm around her shoulders, pulling her next to him with a strength that again surprised her. She saw his eyes close, and as she concentrated, she did the same. They both disappeared as silently as they’d come.

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Neville’s sudden reappearance in the Great Hall – or what was left of it – with Hermione, caused the bustle therein to utterly cease for a long moment. Hermione felt strangely self-conscious, as every eye fell on her, took in her disheveled appearance, and then slid down to the bundle wrapped across her chest and abdomen.

And then it was as if everyone galvanized back into movement all at once. Megan was busy over a bloodstained body that Hermione did not immediately recognize. The Slytherin table, which had alone survived undamaged, held several of the more seriously wounded. Hermione’s eyes tripped over those walking around, nearly all of them had some kind of patched up injury. There was several draped forms lined up neatly in another corner, and Hermione could not bring herself to look at them overlong, feeling selfish and defiantly glad that Harry was not among them. Yet, a darker part of her added snidely.

Remus Lupin was the nearest and reached her first, sweeping her up into half an embrace, with his right arm in a sling, but while being mindful of the load she carried.

“Merlin, it’s good to see you, Hermione.”

“It’s good to see you, Pro – Remus,” she replied in a tremulous voice.

“Hermione says that Harry was in the Headmaster’s office – at the last,” Neville told him. Remus nodded.

“Seamus has only just regained consciousness. He says that’s where he and Blaise were headed with Harry, when they were attacked by Lucius Malfoy.”

Hermione was nodding as if she’d heard all this before, her mind going back to Harry’s final confrontation with the elder Malfoy.

“What did Blaise have to say?” she asked, and Remus’ face flickered in the same way that Neville’s had earlier.

“He didn’t make it. We found his body and Seamus’ together in the corridor that leads to the Headmaster’s office. Seamus was alive, but only just.”

“But nobody – ” Hermione began with difficulty, twisting her hands together. “Nobody’s gone inside yet?”

“Fred and Arthur are on their way there now. It’s been slow going, trying to make progress, not knowing how close anything else is to collapsing. We’ve been trying to shore things up as we go, but there’ve been a few scattered skirmishes – those aren’t helping – and nearly everyone’s been hurt in one way or another...”

Hermione bit back a strangled cry in her throat, and was already moving in that direction.

“Then I should – ” she began, but was swaying visibly on her feet. A firm hand closed around her upper arm. She turned, and found herself looking directly into Neville’s face.

“You need,” he emphasized, not unkindly, “to go let Megan look at you – and the baby. You’ve just given birth for Merlin’s sake. And wasn’t Laurel a little early?”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but stopped, struggling to keep back tears of fear and disappointment. Neville was right. After all Ron had done for her... and Harry had made it more than clear where his priorities lay. She let out a breath, and then nodded, with an acquiescent.

“Okay.”

Megan looked overwhelmed and unsure, as Hermione unstrapped the baby, and they transfigured part of a bench into a small cradle.

“I’m – I’m afraid I don’t know a lot about babies...” she began, as she gently pushed the folds of the robes back to look at the tiny girl. “But I – sweet Merlin!”

“What!?” Hermione almost shouted in frantic worry, though Megan’s voice was not alarmed, but rather astonished. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing that I can see,” Megan replied, running her hands up and down the limbs of the infant, then scanning her with her wand. “But Hermione, look at her eyes.”

Hermione realized that in the dim light of the cave, she had not yet gotten a good look at Laurel’s eyes, and had assumed that they would be the murky slate blue found in most fair-skinned newborns. But as she leaned over Megan’s shoulder and peered full into her daughter’s face for the first time, she understood why Megan had reacted the way she did.

Laurel’s eyes already had very little blue left in them, and the flecks of their transition showed a clear and brilliant green.

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She stood on the grounds at Hogwarts, the stately grey castle looking like a jewel in the center of verdant green lawn. The sky was a brilliant rainwashed blue, so blazing that it almost made her eyes water, and the sun was inset like a bright jewel bestowed by a benevolent deity. A refreshing wind lapped at her hair and the hem of her dress.

Her dress was clean, a light white linen, and her hair was clean. She was clean. Her soul felt light, happy, like she could fling her arms wide and spin in circles there on the soft lawn, like she could laugh in abandonment, for no other reason than the sheer joy of laughing.

And then she saw them both, ambling toward her from the distance: one tall, one not as tall; one with his hair a burnished fiery copper, and one capped by shining ebony. Both were smiling, hands in pockets, white shirts, tail out, sleeves rolled up. They were barefoot.

Everything was perfect. Her boys were here. Hogwarts was here. Not only was everything unscathed, but it was as if the dirty, imperfect filter through which the world had ever been viewed had been removed.

A high-pitched baby squeal reached her ears, and she knew instantly that it was Laurel. She thought if she succumbed to any more joy that she might die of it. There was a wicker basket sitting in the grass, and a chubby pink arm waved out of it.

“There’s my girl!” came a voice, and it was his, with a lilt of carefree laughter in it like she’d never heard before. She turned, her breath catching with the rapture of it all.

“Harry...” she breathed.

“Hermione,” it was an unfamiliar voice, a female voice, and its introduction instantly struck a sour note into her perfection, as if the pretty melody she played had suddenly become discordant.

She turned away, looking back at the basket. Laurel squealed happily to herself, and she moved towards the cradle, intent on picking up her daughter. She could feel Harry’s presence immediately behind her. Any moment now, his arms would encircle her waist, his fingers entwine with hers; she would feel the vibration of his voice in her ear, with a whispered endearment.

“Hermione.” Her shoulder was being shaken. “Hermione, the baby – Laurel is – ”

Hermione’s eyes flew open at the same time that she recognized Megan’s voice, and heard Laurel, wailing in full fury. Reality boomeranged back to her with all the eye-watering force of a blow to the face.

“Oh,” she said fuzzily, rising from her pallet in the floor. “Oh, right. Sorry.”

A few torches flickered orangey-yellow in random sconces that had remained intact and in place. In their uneven light, she could see the enchanted ceiling, midnight blue sky studded with stars and a half-moon. It flickered from time to time as if it had been magically short-circuited, and Hermione was able to discern the portion of the Hall that was now unroofed; it's midnight-blue sky and moon and stars remained solid. She stared at the ceiling for a long moment, trying to remember the last time she had seen the sky. Had it been her trip to Little Hangleton with Fred? So long ago? she mused, or is it, so recently? She felt suddenly as if units of time were just arbitrary words, and maybe seconds were really hours, and days actually years.

A few people who were well enough to be up remained awake, moving about various tasks that could not be shirked because of mere fatigue or speaking in hushed conversations of loss. There were two figures standing watch, wands out, on either side of the ruined doors to the Great Hall. Megan flitted among the injured like a fairy, soothing the occasional cry of pain. Most of the others were slumped across benches or up against walls or on scavenged or conjured blankets, asleep with the utter exhaustion of the battle-weary.

Wincing at the persistent soreness, she shuffled over to the makeshift cradle, and picked up Laurel, who was tearlessly squalling, red-faced and thrashing. Her downy dark hair felt like velvet under Hermione's nose, as she pressed her cheek to the baby's soft head.

“Are you hungry, baby girl? I'm so sorry. Are you hungry?”

Laurel had ceased screaming when she'd been picked up, but her wails now turned into almost a frantic excitement, snuffling into Hermione's neck as she apparently caught her mother's scent. Hermione padded back to her blanket, and sat cross-legged against the wall, scooting over so that she could drape the cloth around her shoulders. Once Laurel had reached her target, she quieted so quickly that it was almost embarrassing.

“Is everything okay? Do you – do you need anything?” Megan, passing by, asked uncertainly.

Only to know that my husband is okay. Only to have my best friend back. Tears stung at the backs of her eyelids again, as she thought of Ron, alone, in that dark cave. She hadn't seen Neville among those moving about, and hoped that meant that he was still at the old headquarters, and that Fleur, Ginny, and Madam Pomfrey would be safely extracted.

She realized that she hadn't replied to Megan's question, and sniffed twice before her voice would work properly.

“No. No, thank you, Megan. I'm – we're fine.” We're fine. Whatever happened tomorrow, she was part of a 'we' now. Finding that somewhat hard to fathom, she peered down at Laurel, who blinked up at her with a sleepy, contented gaze as she placidly sucked. Hermione didn't reckon that she'd ever seen anything so beautiful. Even the slight rhythmic movement of the baby's rib cage against her own was as a balm to her soul. She leaned her head back against the stone wall, and sighed deeply.

When Laurel had finished, and Hermione had rubbed her shoulder blades to coax a burp out of her, she stood, still more than a bit unsteady, and gently replaced her daughter in the cradle. As she hovered over the side, tucking a recalcitrant lock of hair behind her ear, her attention was arrested by a commotion from the doorway.

“OY! Some help over here please. Jones! Get the hell over here, now.”

Hermione's heart vaulted up into her throat so quickly that she thought she'd actually gag. Instead, she swayed on her feet so violently that she had to grab the edge of the Slytherin table for support. She didn't even notice as the corner bit uncomfortably into her palm.

The voice was Fred's.

If he were dead, Fred wouldn't want help. If he were dead, they wouldn't need Megan, was all Hermione could think. Her eyes were transfixed on the giant hole where the double doors marking the entrance to the Great Hall had once been, but her feet may as well have been fastened to the floor with a Sticking charm.

"Harry..." Her voice came out a wobbly squeak, but there was no one there to notice, as Megan had already headed for the voice at a dead run. At least, Hermione thought there was no one to hear, and she started visibly when a hand touched her wrist, and then feebly patted it, in an obvious effort to give comfort.

She looked down, and barely recognized Cho, swathed as she was in salve and potion-soaked bandages, pink healing charms faintly showing on the more minor injuries that had been left uncovered.

"Cho!" she uttered in surprise, and then cast about in her mind for something else – anything else – to say. Fred and whoever accompanied him – presumably his father – were nearly to the doorway now; Hermione could see their shadows wavering on the wall.

"I'm – I'm sure he'll be okay, Hermione," she managed, with a barely audible raspiness that must have meant she had taken a hex to the throat. Hermione tried to smile, and forced her words past the clog in her throat.

"Thank you, Cho." Perhaps no other words were really necessary.

Then Mr. Weasley appeared framed in the entrance, walking backwards, wand up, clearly Levitating someone. Hermione's hands were digging into the table's unyielding surface so hard that she felt a fingernail bend back and tear away.

Why aren't you moving? Something inside her shrieked, and finally, she was able to propel herself in that direction, even as a limp body proceeded in, with Fred bringing up the rear.

“Harry! Harry!” The word broke through, tumbled from her lips, louder the second time. And if anyone hadn’t been paying attention to Fred’s initial outburst, they were certainly paying attention now.

“Lay – just put him – lay him here,” Megan was saying, clearly flustered, and the two Weasleys did so. “Where did you find him?”

“In the Headmaster’s Office,” Fred answered. “Took us a bit. If the fact that most of the ceiling is now on the floor weren’t enough...the gargoyle’s charm has obviously malfunctioned as well; it tried to bite off my other arm.” His tone was light, but his eyes were serious, not leaving Harry, as Megan began her once-over.

Hermione barreled into their midst then, completely ignoring the pain that shot through her hips and down her right leg. She flew at them so rapidly that she would have landed on top of Harry, if she had not stopped herself by bracing her arms on the table’s edge.

“What happened? Did – could you tell... what happened?” She felt breathless, her heart pounding impossibly fast. Her eyes skittered diagnostically over Harry. He was covered in fine dust and his glasses were broken. There were scattered minor cuts and bruises, which seemed to generally correspond with various rips and tears in his clothing as well. Save for the fact that he was unconscious, he seemed to be – Hermione’s hopeful assessment died as she saw his hands... and then remembered them from her vision, the way he’d held on to his wand, even as it burned him, ensuring that all of Voldemort’s magic was drained away. She sucked air sharply between her teeth, as she took in the way the fingers were twisted in on themselves, the skin appearing to be all but burned away. The wounds were livid and seeping.

“Do we have any murtlap? Has someone been to the hospital wing?” Hermione asked breathlessly, her hands fluttering over Harry’s. She so wanted to take them in hers, but dared not touch them. Something flashed quickly in Megan’s face.

That was a stupid question, Hermione.

“The hospital wing was the first place we cleared,” the field healer responded evenly, having evidently successfully squelched the annoyance, refraining from actually saying obviously. “We’ve got some murtlap, but not – not enough for that. That – it needs – I’ve never seen magical burns that severe – someone who’s trained, I – ”

Remus had appeared at some point, thrusting a crockery bowl full of gelatinous yellow liquid at Megan, as his eyes roved over Harry in as worried a fashion as Hermione had.

Of course, Hermione thought dazedly. He’s all Remus has left as well.

Megan was dabbing on the murtlap, as gently as she could, and yet still Harry hissed between clenched teeth, tossing his head from one side to the other. Still unconscious, he tried to curl his hands into fists, and the resultant cry of pain tore at Hermione’s heart.

“Good God, Megan!” Hermione snapped. “Stupefy.” She jabbed Ron’s wand in Harry’s direction, and some of the pain eased out of his face as he went limp. Gratitude surged through her that the substitute wand had worked decently enough.

“It’s not advisable to Stun someone who has been the victim of a magical injury. With burns of this magnitude – it could have caused his whole system to overreact.” Megan was angry. Her voice stayed low, but her lips were pressed together in a tight line.

“I – ” She stopped in the midst of an irate retort, and scrubbed both hands over her face, sighing tiredly. “I – just couldn’t stand seeing him in pain, Megan. I’m – I’m sorry, I ... shouldn’t have spoken out of turn like that. You’re the Healer...”

“Just a medic.” Megan lifted one shoulder in self-deprecation. “If it’s any consolation,” she added, sympathy beginning to tinge her dark eyes. “I wish Madam Pomfrey was here too.”

“She was with you, Hermione,” Fred spoke up suddenly, from across the table on Harry’s other side. “She – Ginny...” His voice trailed off, as his mind tripped through possibilities that would explain the

situation, none of them very good. His eyes dropped to the wand Hermione used; there was unwilling recognition there, and he had to draw in a deep, trembling breath before continuing.

“Hermione, what happened?”

She didn’t respond right away, but hurried as quickly as she could manage back over to the cradle where Laurel lay, drowsing. She lifted the baby carefully out before making her way back over to Fred, Mr. Weasley at his elbow.

“The – the Death Eaters were coming,” she began, wishing that she could sound more like her normal self. “We took – we were going to hide in Remus’s tunnel, and – but I was in labor, and I – I’m sorry. I slowed everyone down. They were close, but – but Voldemort was – he was watching with the Map – through its ashes; we’d destroyed it. And I think he caused a – the tunnel to collapse, and Ron – Ron and I were separated from the others. I don’t know what’s happened to them. Neville – Neville went back to the cavern, to see...” She proffered the baby up to Arthur Weasley, who took her, even as he looked at Hermione with all too knowing comprehension, clearly waiting for the rest of her story.

“Ron had to – he delivered...” The words were beginning to emerge unwillingly. Hermione felt like she was having trouble breathing. “He delivered her, but he – he’d been hurt during – during the rockslide, and I hadn’t realized... he reopened the – the injury from the Ministry. I – I didn’t know what to do... I didn’t act quickly enough. I’m so sorry.”

Mr. Weasley’s chin wobbled, as he looked down at the baby. Fred was pale and strained, and for a moment, Hermione could not tell whether or not he’d even been listening.

“His – his last act of life was giving Laurel hers. I – I couldn’t have done it without him. He – he even shielded me... from the falling rocks, and – ” Hermione couldn’t seem to stop talking. It was as if she thought talking would ease some of the dreadful pressure in her chest and throat

The two remaining Weasley men stood very still, with Mr. Weasley still holding Laurel as if he'd been Petrified in that position. Hermione swayed slightly on her feet, at a loss, and then realized that she was waiting for one of them to comfort her, to pat her on the head and tell her that it was not her fault. She felt a wave of self-loathing, and reached toward Laurel, kissing Mr. Weasley's cheek as she did so.

"He was a hero...Arthur." She tried to infuse her voice with as much sincerity and meaning as she could. "He was my hero."

The Weasley patriarch looked at her then, and smiled, though the effect was somewhat washed away by his swimming eyes. She slid her arms between his and Laurel, and would have lifted her back, but he stopped her.

"No... that is, if you don't mind. I'd like to hold her for awhile."

"Of course," Hermione swallowed with difficulty. "Take as long as you like."

A kind of despair swelled up and filled her, as she turned back toward the table on which lay her husband. It's never going to get easier... In fact, she thought it could actually get worse, as they, in all likelihood, did not yet know the extent of their losses.

But Ron... there was only one way that her loss would cut more deeply, and she did not want to contemplate that.

Then there was another commotion at the entry, and the sentries were shouting something out into what remained of the entry hall, their wands raised. But Hermione recognized Neville's silhouette as he came into the Great Hall, hands aloft until the guards realized who he was, and she watched, heart in throat, to see who came with him.

One...two...three... and there's William. The third person carried a tiny bundle that couldn't be anything else. The gratefulness that surged through her was so sudden and swamping that Hermione felt her knees buckle.

Fleur saw her first and called out, in a most un-Veela-like fashion, and the two new mothers reached each other at about the same time that Ginny was swept up in the arms of her father and brother.

“But look at you!” Fleur said, sweeping her gaze down Hermione’s somewhat slimmer figure. “And Laurel – she is – ?”

“She’s fine, she’s fine,” Hermione hastened to assure her. She saw Megan, now with Laurel in her arms, quietly come up to Madam Pomfrey, speaking to her in a low serious tone. The younger girl’s face was grave, and the mediwitch nodded in a business-like way. Both of them moved out of Hermione’s field of vision.

“We were so worried! We got into the very end of the tunnel and managed to keep a Protego up long enough to ward off most of the rocks. We wanted to find you, but we – we didn’t – ” Fleur looked upset.

“I know,” Hermione replied. They hadn’t used their medallions to get to her for the same reasons she had not done so for them. There was no way to know whether or not your destination was buried in rock.

“To think of you, stranded in a cave, delivering a baby...” Fleur’s tone sounded lightly chagrined.

“But I had Ron with me,” Hermione put in, managing to curl her lips upward in a smile. “He was brilliant, he did everything just – ”

“But where is Ron?” Ginny asked, from the depths of her father’s smoke-blackened robes.

For a moment, Hermione couldn’t speak, but despite Ginny’s sightless eyes, she didn’t need to say anything. Fleur pressed one fist to her mouth, and Ginny begin to shake her head in denial.

“No.” Her voice was pitched very low or it would not have come out at all. “No. Not Ron. Not Ron.”

Hermione felt like each syllable was piercing her already wounded heart. There had been no verbalized accusation, but she still felt as if

Ginny had hurled imprecations at her. It was all her fault, she thought. Ron had been protecting her at the Ministry, and helping to move her through the tunnels. He had died because of her.

“Ginny, I’m so sorry. It’s my fault he’s gone... it’s my fault ...” She felt the last vestiges of her control slipping, and a sob rattled its way upward. Her abdomen throbbed; her head pounded; she missed Ron so badly, and the uncertainty about Harry was going to drive her mad. She was slipping downwards; her ears were ringing loudly. Then she felt strong arms around her, lifting her back to her feet. The arms remained there, securing her, and she welcomed the support.

It was Neville.

“It wasn’t your fault, Hermione,” was all he said, quietly.

There was a complete and aching silence that hung over the group, save for Ginny’s muffled sobs. Tears were streaming down Fleur’s beautiful face like liquid crystal, but she managed to ask,

“Can we see the baby?”

A low raspy growl startled all of them.

“Neville, get your hands off my wife.”

~*~*~*~*

Hermione hadn’t known that it was possible to feel such despair and elation in such close proximity, and she wondered that her heart didn’t simply cease beating from the emotional roller coaster of it all.

Harry was conscious; he was alive, he was teasing her, for Merlin’s sake. She ran her hands across his forehead, over his cheeks, and along his jawline, tangling her fingers briefly in his matted hair, before spreading them along his shoulders, smoothing them along the dirty fabric of his robes, careful to stop before coming anywhere near his injured hands. He smiled at her, leaning into her caresses, but there was a shadow in his eyes that told her that he had heard at least some of her conversation with the Weasleys.

"Is it true?" he asked. "Ron's...?"

"Yes." Her voice was watery. Tears glinted in the torchlight as they tracked their way from the corners of his vivid eyes to his hair. "He told me – told me to tell you... to tell you that – that he was glad that we ... that we're together. And to tell Laurel how much he loved her – right from the first..." Her voice wisped out on her then. A spasm of emotion quivered across Harry's face, and then she saw him squelch it, as if it were something too deep and painful and utterly heart-rending to be examined at this time.

"Laurel!" Harry's voice was shocked, as if he'd even forgotten he had a daughter. "Is she okay? Has Madam Pomfrey – she wasn't due for – " He actually tried to sit up,

"She's okay, Harry. Perfectly healthy, just small. Madam Pomfrey was looking her over, just to be sure." Her voice trailed off, as she saw the mediwitch approaching, smiling tenderly at the bundle in her arms.

Harry began to lift his arms as if to take the baby, but the color immediately washed out of his face as he did so. Madam Pomfrey handed the infant to his wife.

"You can goggle over your daughter while I tend to your hands, Mr. Potter." The familiar reproving tone was in her voice, but her eyes were soft. She cast several skilled Numbing charms, as she lifted and turned his hands to examine them. "Can you tell me what happened?"

Harry began to relate the story, as his eyes roamed avidly over the baby. Hermione could tell by the yearning look on his face how much he longed to touch her.

"... Voldemort was screaming. It was – I thought if I could just hold on a moment longer, that it would all be over. And then the wand starting overloading. It – my hands... but I thought if – " Words seemed to fail him. "I just tried to hold on until it was over."

“Hogwarts was collapsing. You were unconscious.” Hermione said, plowing over the unasked question in his eyes, by saying, “I saw you. How did you – ?”

“He’d cast a Protego charm,” Fred spoke up, approaching the bedside for the first time. “When we found him, the ceiling over him was still hovering, maybe a meter off of the ground. Barely anything had even touched him.”

“You can’t cast a Protego when you’re unconscious.” Harry sounded mystified and a little worried. Hermione wasn’t sure why.

“Ron’s Lumos lasted while he was unconscious,” she put in, even though she knew that they were not the same thing, that the Protego was a charm that had to be sustained, directly related to the strength of the caster.

“Mr. Potter, where is your wand?” Madam Pomfrey asked, and Hermione wondered at the concerned look on her face. Megan had reappeared with a thick salve, and, after Madam Pomfrey cast a medicinal spell on it, began silently slathering it on Harry’s hands.

“I don’t know. I – ”

“It’s right here,” Fred offered, unwrapping a cloth parcel from the pockets of his robes, and proffering the ruins of Harry’s wand. It was in three pieces and flaky black from being burned. What was left of the Repository Stones spilled out into his hand, dirty green, and very nearly ground into sand.

Harry’s eyes were riveted to the remains of his wand, and Hermione felt his breathing accelerate.

“Mr. Potter,” Madam Pomfrey asked coolly. Her wand moved over him slowly and smoothly, taking a scan. “What is your Patronus?”

The question seemed to suck all the air from the room. Megan’s hands froze mid-motion, where they were engaged in winding charmed bandages around the wounds, covering the salve.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” Hermione burst out with righteous indignation, startling the baby in her arms. “How can you even presume – ?” Harry lay one thickly wrapped hand over hers.

“It’s a legitimate question, Hermione,” he said calmly, though she could see the fear that flickered in his eyes. The what-if? fear. “My Patronus is a stag, like my father’s.”

“She can’t think.... they can’t think...surely...” Hermione’s voice was a despairing whisper.

“Voldemort’s dead,” Fred said helpfully. “We saw the body – it’s still up there in the office; didn’t burst into flames or melt away into nothing but robes, or anything.”

“But the Respository Stones are destroyed. The wand – my wand – overloaded. If his magic – ”

“My question was a precaution only, Mr. Potter,” Madam Pomfrey tried to reassure him. Her wand chirruped softly, and her eyebrows soared to her hairline. “It would seem that, while some of his magic was expended toward your Protego during the overload, a good deal of it did seem to find its way back inside you.”

Harry’s head sank toward his chest, his face gone a ghastly gray. Hermione saw the muscles in his neck work as he swallowed hard.

“Harry, it’s just magic. Magic itself isn’t good or evil – it’s the wielder who can bend it in one of those directions.” She laid her head on his shoulder, willing him to believe her. Looking up at him, she could see the uncertainty in his eyes, as he grappled with half a dozen things at once: the looming imminence of the future, the completion of his task, the death of their best friend, new fatherhood, rebuilding the Wizarding world, and living a ‘normal’ life with more magic than many other wizards would even dream of.

“Are you sure?” he asked once, and seemed to come to a decision, after seeing her nod.

“It’s over, Harry,” she whispered.

“Then....” He seemed to be mulling over a weighty decision. “Then, I guess it’s time we let everyone know.” He flicked his hand in her direction, and Ron’s wand flew out of her pocket, coming to rest clumsily between his thickly bandaged thumb and forefinger.

“Lux Prevalet,” he said quietly, but the spell burst forth with a rush of noise that caught everyone’s attention. The spell did not blast a hole in what was left of the roof, but it was more like – Hermione noted – the roof moved aside for the spell, and then reformed after it had passed through. There was a shriek and explosion of noise like fireworks, and the Light mark – the white phoenix and lightning bolt that had been seen over the Scottish village – was imprinted on the enchanted ceiling, exactly as Hermione was sure it appeared outside as well. Silvery streaks shot out from it in all directions, fading gradually from sight at various points on the horizon, and she stood gaping for a long moment before she realized it had been at least two dozen stags, gone to spread the news that Voldemort had been vanquished.

“Oh my God,” Hermione uttered in a low voice. She could not think of anything more perfect than Harry sending out a message of victory with Ron’s wand, but had the sneaking suspicion that Harry really had not needed a wand at all. She cast an appraising look at him.

Harry appeared abashed.

“Can I hold my daughter now?” he asked.

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Four Months Later...

“It was a beautiful ceremony,” Hermione murmured, threading her arm through his, and balancing Laurel on her other hip, as they strolled across the gently sloping grounds at Hogwarts. A breeze teased pleasantly at their hair and the hems of their robes, and it occurred to her that the day was not far from the one she had dreamed about the first night after the battle was over.

Harry seemed pale and a little strained. Only Hermione and the Weasleys really knew what kind of toll managing that much magic took on him. He had responded well to the training though, and was noticeably improving.

"I can't believe I cooperated with the Daily Prophet," he grumbled half-heartedly, running one hand through his already wind-tossed hair. In the direct sunlight, the webby lines criss-crossing over his hands were more noticeable than usual.

"It was incredibly generous of you to wait until they were ready to print their first issue. And not at all surprising that you did it, since Luna's taken it over." She smiled crookedly at him. "It's not at all the same paper now, is it?"

Harry's lips twisted upward in response.

"Thank Merlin for that."

By unspoken common consent, they stopped, their eyes taking in the vista before them. Hogwarts still looked skeletal, but there was a good number of people about, those who had been present at the Dedication. Tomorrow, Hermione assumed, the hordes of wizards who'd been recruited from around the world would be back at their job: the consuming task of reconstructing Hogwarts by the first of September.

"Do you think they'll be done in time?" she asked.

"Probably," was Harry's laconic response. She figured that he would probably give an anonymous nudge or two if the project was in danger of falling too far behind.

"How long would it have taken you?" Faint amusement tinged her voice, and Harry gave her a withering look before admitting,

"Not this long." After a brief hesitation, he added, "Hermione, you know why I can't do that." The thought of any more media scrutiny, of the misunderstandings and apprehensions that were sure to follow if it became known that he now claimed Voldemort's magic for his own,

were nothing but abhorrent to him. He still carried a wand, still did things in a deliberately slower way, still held himself back in nearly all aspects of his life.

"I know," she responded, sighing a little. It seemed that 'normal' would forever be beyond Harry's grasp.

"D'you want to look at it again?" he nodded toward the object of the dedication, sitting like a piece of onyx in the center of the grounds, exactly equidistant from the front gate and the Forbidden Forest. "Without so many people around?"

"Yes, I would," she answered, after a moment of consideration. It had been difficult to stand before the crowd with Harry, to feel the weight of their expectations on her, along with the curious eyes and hungry camera lenses.

It was a huge piece of marble, polished and finished to a sheer face on one side, but left in misshapen and natural appearance everywhere else. At the top, magically etched in large letters it read,

The Resistance

In smaller letters underneath, the text explained, In memoriam of those who fell during the struggle to overcome a madman.

There had been much debate as to the actual wording, but it had been Arthur Weasley, who as Minister for Magic, and the person up there with the most people bearing his last name, who had made the final decision: refusing to refer to Voldemort by name or incur any more of his fear-inspired glory by labeling him You-Know-Who.

There had also been much talk of the names to include on the stone, but it was finally decided to begin after Voldemort's second return to corporeal existence. Thus, Cedric Diggory's name appeared first on the memorial, followed by countless more, too many more, Hermione thought. Her fingers skimmed over Sirius Black... Amelia Bones... some of those lost so early in the fight that it seemed impossibly long ago.

She brushed her fingertips further down the list, reading the names through eyes shimmery with tears. She felt Harry's hand tighten on her shoulder.

Alastor Moody... Molly Weasley...George, Bill, Charlie, Percy...Michael Corner...Nymphadora Tonks...Padma Patil...Penelope Clearwater...Blaise Zabini... and Ron Weasley – almost the last, almost the last, but the War had claimed one final life before all was said and done. Dennis Creevey had succumbed to his injuries three days after Voldemort's defeat. Hermione had seen Colin at the ceremony inside; he seemed thin and withdrawn.

It was odd, she reflected, how in some ways, the remaining fighters of the Order wanted to be around each other, wanted to reassure themselves that those with whom they'd suffered the most were well and whole, and yet – those they loved most that remained were themselves living reminders of what was lost, what would be forever lost.

She sniffed loudly, as her fingers traced the tail of the 'y' in Weasley, and then dropped to her side. She laid her cheek on top of Laurel's soft dark hair.

They had told no one outside the Order of the prophecy, and Hermione was glad that it had been destroyed that day. Hermione had thought tearfully of her birth so close to Ron's death, and wondered about Laurel's cries that had led her to the location of Ron's wand – out of light, into light. She wondered how much of it was foreordained and how much was coincidence. Harry had been adamant that no child of his would have their life dictated to them by a flimsy glass ball.

Laurel reached one flailing hand up to snarl in Hermione's curls, and said, "Gah," to remind her parents how long they'd been standing there. They turned in unison, arms bracketing each other, leaning against each other, and walked away slowly, though they both knew that pieces of themselves would forever remain behind.

"Are we going to the Burrow?" Hermione said, thinking of the cottage that Fred had rebuilt, quirkier than ever, but not nearly as ramshackle

as in days of old. She was going to have to an anti-staining charm on her dress before she sat down on anything.

“Yeah.” Harry’s voice was faraway and reflective, as he pressed a kiss into her hair. “Ginny said she’s making lunch.”

The End

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Some notes:

I can’t believe I’m done. I felt like Noah Webster writing the Z part of the dictionary; I kept pacing around, and could barely make myself sit and type.

Anyway, thanks for sticking with me, and do leave a review on your way out, if you’d like. I was working toward a sort of angsty, but hopeful moving-on kind of thing, especially at the last section, so I’d love to see what you think of the end, and the story as a whole.

Until we meet again!

lorien